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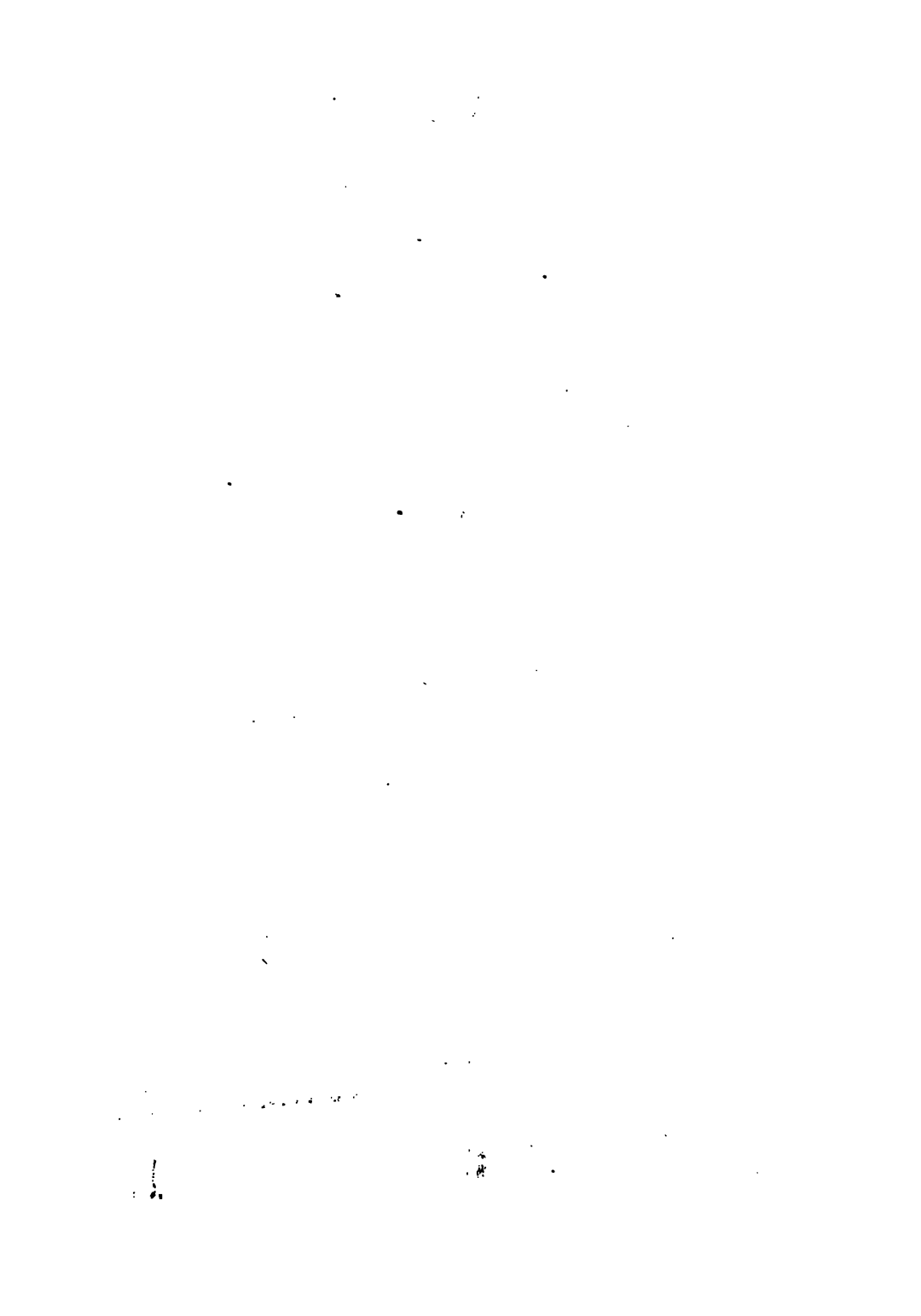
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THE
SHADOW IN THE HOUSE.

A NOVEL.

BY

JOHN SAUNDERS,

AUTHOR OF "LOVE'S MARTYRDOM," ETC.

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THE
SHADOW IN THE HOUSE.

CHAPTER I.

THE HOUSE.

IF you have ever travelled from Leatham to Northworth, in the county of ———, by the last remaining coach of the district (for the railway has not yet touched this part), you must have noticed as you crossed the little heath about seven miles from Leatham (where the furze seems to be never tired of blossoming) a double row of black, aged yews, on the right of the road ; and which guide the eye, through a kind of avenue between them, to a pair of iron gates on the border of the heath. Over those gates spreads in every direction, while ascending to a great height, one of the finest and most striking of our forest trees, the purple beech ; and through its very centre stream forth, and droop gracefully over the gates, touching the very heads of the passers-by, the green tresses of a laburnum ; beautiful even now, when its flowers have passed, through its contrast in colour and form with its gigantic neighbour and patron.

The gates are open as usual ; and we need not

wonder at that when we perceive the place they are supposed to guard. It is a wide and winding lane, a scene of tangled beauty and luxuriance. Self-sown trees, apparently,—for what hand would have so oddly, or could have so felicitously, dispersed them?—grow all along the way; crab-apples, silver-coated birches, and mountain ashes, with their fruit just reddening; leaving, it is true, a tolerably clear and unbroken road through them for carriages, and the ground is there firm and even. But at the sides, which assume occasionally almost the aspect of little bits from a dark cathedral aisle, the ground swells and sinks, narrows and widens, in the most pleasantly careless fashion; with little knolls studding it at intervals; and you cannot walk without the fear of crushing at each step some wild flower, so thickly is the soil enamelled with bloom. But it is the banks that are the glory of this lane; rising so high, and exhibiting such a continual change. In some parts there are tall slender trees, the roots of which come out over your head, knotted picturesquely against the red soil. The banks are, indeed, a perfect wilderness of tree and branch, and leaf and flower, and wild fruit. Here you see a path abruptly mounting, which will take you into the thickest parts, and run along through the green covert, quite out of sight of the lane—or, indeed, for that matter, of everything else; and there you will find it as suddenly and capriciously descend, as though the only object had been to aid the hunters for birds' nests, or the sloe or blackberry-loving children, or, perhaps, simply to hint to the thoughtless wayfarer—"Come and see what a little

world there is up here, quite away from your own great world below ! ”

But we soon come to a cross-barred gate, just where the lane narrows, and the high banks draw near to each other ; and through that gate, and an avenue of chesnuts beyond, we get our first glimpse of Bletchworth Hall, the residence of Mr. Bletchworth Dell. It is only the corner of this side of the building that is visible, just a strip from the ground to the roof, for the trees prevent one seeing more of all that portion of it which stretches away to the right. The strip reveals a grassy slope, ascending as from a moat, surmounted, next the building, by a low terrace wall, a handsome bay window above, and, still higher, a gable roof. As we draw nearer we perceive that a broad gravel walk interposes between the house and the low wall of the moat ; and that the latter has been filled up on the right, but extends, on the left, with its low terrace wall before the window, to the corner, where a vase with scarlet geraniums breaks its level line ; then, turning at right angles, it goes along the whole front of the building, and disappears round the corner at the farther extremity. The sides of the parts of the moat that have been thus preserved have been turfed over ; and the effect of the long-continued slope, rising from the depths of the earth, and its wall-edging, has been to give to the entire mansion a kind of airy dignity of position ; to show it as seated majestically on a noble terrace, and to suggest an idea of actual elevation of the soil, which is by no means correct.

The road here divides. The branch to the right goes round to the back of the house, and through

trees which come quite up to the Hall, and allow its very irregular side to be visible only by glimpses. Take care! you are now within the range of a pair of fierce eyes, that are peering at you through long shaggy black hair: Nero, the watch-dog, has a kennel close by, and if you pause or appear undecided as to which way you will go, he will set up a ferocious howl, and an interminable barking. He lies in the way to the kitchen, and is particularly suspicious of visitors to that quarter. But if you move on the beaten and carefully-defined way to the left (that leads round the outside of the lawn through a perfect arcade of laburnum trees), as all honest visitors should; and make no dubious or suspicious movements, such as men of sense always avoid, Nero will content himself with a low growl that says plainly enough, "Umph, all right, I suppose; but mind, if it isn't, I'm here."

And, pausing opposite the Hall at the first break in the enclosure of evergreens, we look in upon one of the most charming lawns that even this lawn-loving country can exhibit; unrivalled for its delicious, springy, tender-hued, velvety-sward (I suspect the dry moat has something to do with that, it carries away so much water after heavy rains); unrivalled for its collection of standard roses, with stems that here seem always graceful and natural—with blooms that appear to be unassailable by canker or insect; unrivalled for the few flowering or choice trees that it admits in proximity to the flower beds (Mr. Dell ransacked the country to find the largest and most perfect specimens, and spent no little money and time in getting them safely transplanted, and you see how

they flourish—these pines and araucarias—these double red hawthorns, double red peaches, and double white cherries—these tulip-trees, and magnolias, and imperial paulownias, and, above all, these most graceful and varied weeping trees scattered about); unrivalled in the exquisite colours and forms of the flower-beds, and the symmetrical, and harmonious, and reciprocating curves of the gravel paths, which are covered with white powdered sea-shells—colours and forms which only a painter's eye could have foreseen and arranged; unrivalled, lastly, in that magnificent sloping high belt of rhododendrons, with lower-growing azaleas in front, the whole in gorgeous bloom, and which make the eye almost quiver with a sense of oppressive delight, so wondrous, so enchanting, is their splendour. But, in fact, Mr. Dell, the owner and author of this lawn, for he planned it, *is* an artist in taste and feeling, if not in actual display on the canvas, and even there he is supposed to show some power. And Mr. Dell has for his gardener a man who is the admiration and terror of every horticultural society within a hundred miles, for no prize is safe from his skilful and rapacious fingers. You may understand, therefore, how it is that, with such limited space, and with Mr. Dell's moderate means, this lawn has become famous through the whole neighbourhood.

Continuing along the road, which presently sinks as it rounds the next corner to draw nearer to the Hall,—and sinks so deeply that those who walk on the lawn look right over it, and over its laburnum fringe and the coppice beyond to the open country, and the picturesque range of low hills in the distance,—we

soon reach another turn, which, cutting off an angle of the lawn, takes us to the old bridge of the old moat, still existing—and a marvellous piece of solid masonry it is ;—and, crossing that, we stand on the broad gravel terrace, in the centre of the Hall front, and directly opposite the square, four-pillared, projecting porch and entrance.

And now your eye falls inquisitively on a small but remarkable piece of building, looking like a bit of domestic architecture fetched bodily out of the fifteenth century, and set down here for the wonder of the people of the nineteenth. Yes, that building, projecting itself so oddly forward from the top, so rich in timber carvings, and so full of glass windows in quaint patterns, is the sole remaining relic of an extensive manorial residence, erected towards the close of the fifteenth century. It is formed of stone and timber, faces three ways, and each face presents the same peculiarities—a ground story nearly all window; sumptuous carvings above, forming a kind of cornice to the next story, which projects greatly forward, having a similar expanse of window; and above this yet a third story, also projecting in advance of the one beneath, but having a smaller lattice window, and high-pitched gable roof; the edges of the latter enriched all the way up by the varying outlines of the carved woodwork, until they meet and terminate in a quaint peak, and gilded vane.

Mark the deeply-cut inscription, in old English, on the woodwork—

*Finis. Grace ne Forde. Anno Domini mccccxiii.
Richardus Gale, Carpenter.*

Within, there is but one room on each story, so that the three exterior windows on the three faces are, in truth, but one; and picturesque rooms they are, with such noble windows to illuminate them. It is a great mistake to imagine the older forms of Tudor domestic architecture were necessarily subject to the disadvantage of gloomy interiors. On the contrary, one wonders as one looks at this fine old relic, how our forefathers managed to bear such an excess of light.

There is one more feature of the Hall—and one only, to which I must draw your attention before I begin my story; and that is the muniment room of Sir Richard Bleytchworthe, (Merchant and Alderman of London, who built the old Manorial mansion). This room is on the west or further side of the Hall, which, like the east or avenue side, is closely—far too closely—pressed in upon by fine old trees, that no owner has had the heart to cut away. As we go thither, repassing the gravel walk in front of the Hall, we are tempted to pause for an instant, and listen with shut eyes to the sounds that fill the air. Vainly you try to disentangle them. Many—and the sweetest—are faint, distant and inexplicable. But there are doves cooing from a little summer-house; there is a peacock sending out now and then his unearthly cry, which puzzles me now, as it has puzzled me before, to decide whether it is most like a trumpet clang, or some wild scream of terror. Bees are humming and buzzing cheerily. Then there are sudden rushings and clappings of wings from a cloud of pigeons overhead, before they settle on the gable

roof of the relic of the old moated mansion. But above all, listen to the songs of the birds from the neighbouring orchard, which is as famous for them as for its patriarchal apple-trees, and its mystic misletoes, with those cold, grey, bloodless, but lustrous berries for eyes. It is the belief of the neighbourhood that there are more thrushes, and blackbirds, and songsters of all kinds in and around the Hall, than in half the county beside. Really to-day it would seem so.

But we have turned the far corner ; and there, in a deep and dark recess of the architecture, we perceive a winding flight of steps on the face of the wall ; green with little tufts of grass which force themselves up through the cracks, and which lead to a little stone balcony, and thence to the room where Sir Richard Bleytchworthe used to sit during the rebuilding of the Hall, and jot down the wages of the labourers, and a host of other details of expenditure, very uninteresting to all but himself just then, but which would gladden the heart of many an antiquary now, if Mr. Dell would but let them be published in illustration of the condition and habits of the people of the fifteenth century. There the papers are, at all events, in that great iron-banded, black, oaken chest, in Sir Richard's favourite room, if any zealous Dryasdust cares to look after them.

As to Sir Richard, I suspect that he caused the present external staircase to be put to this room because he had found the temporary one so convenient for slipping down unexpectedly upon the workmen, to see if they were idling, or putting bad work into the Hall. The room is now equally a favourite with Miss

Grace Addersley, Mr. Dell's cousin, from Virginia, who came here, at his invitation, after her father's death; bringing her mother with her, just ten months ago; and who is now the virtual mistress of the Hall, pending the time when Mr. Dell shall marry.

Yes, Miss Grace Addersley has this room; and she and her mother occupy the apartments extending from here to the front overlooking the lawn, in this wing of the Hall. Perhaps she is there at present. She is fond of looking through that heavy square window, surmounted by the three fantastically shaped peaks of stone, the middle one rising higher than the others, and the whole so strongly relieved against the sky by that soft billow of white cloud that crosses it. The ivy has collected in a thick mass between the window and the peaks, and falls heavily in gloomy festoons half over the window. Generally, no touch of colour kindles the dead grey stone of this window and its dividing mullion, or the little stone balcony, or the greenish grey of the steps, or the murky watery blackness of the glass; but at this moment, (perhaps through some door in the room being opened, and letting in a ray of sunshine from the inner court—the only way it ever gets it), there is a little play of light on the window from within, which makes the stained pane of glass at each of the corners glow forth like four blood-red lights. Were it not for this unusual radiance you could not see the heavy fringe of burnished gold hanging below the upper panes. Stay—what is that bit of doubtful light in one of the middle panes? Ah! yes, it is a face! *her* face, no doubt; turned sideway from the neck; a still face, slightly drooped,

with strong white brows bent forwards, and eyes that are quite invisible to us, gazing on, on, right under the two black cedars, into the impenetrable gloom of Grey Ghost Walk.

How could I have forgotten that? Well, with that, at all events, I will end my description of Bletchworth Hall. The farther you go down the avenue (why is it called Grey Ghost Walk?—I am sure I cannot tell, nor, apparently, can any one else that I have asked), the heavier and gloomier grows the air. In places the darkness is made to seem more dense by the little sunbeams that steal in timidly across the thin-bladed lank grass, that starts up like hair. And in yet other places you come upon bold, large, open-eyed, scentless violets, peering forth with long stalks from the leaves that have ceased to shelter them. The ground is very soft and pulpy towards the end; and in that little patch of thick grass, where the green is almost unnaturally bright, a snake has been seen in the early summer mornings. And here too, when a flickering sunbeam plays upon a bit of the bare moist soil, large clammy worms are writhing about, and wreathing themselves together in ghastly play; while myriads of creeping unclean-looking insects hurry off into shelter from the unwonted beam.

At the end is a door, greenly black, with a lock and hinges red with rust. Thin-leaved worn-out ivy stems chain it across and across; and a spider has carried his web from the lock to the uplifted latch. It is a door of which no one can tell when it was last opened, and looks as though it had grown to the

walls; a door which often sets the schoolboys from Yelverton, the nearest village, conjecturing, as they go past and dig their knives into it, what elysium of currant trees or red bursting gooseberries it opens upon.

But let us get out of the avenue and back into the sunshine. Somehow it chills one's very soul. I wonder what pleasure Miss Grace Addersley can find in looking into such an unlovely, unhealthy vista! True, it points westwards, towards the sunny land she left. Perhaps that may have something to do with her sympathies for Grey Ghost Walk.

CHAPTER II.

THE SHADOW.

“DON'T tell me! anxious to please, indeed! If that's all, can you tell me why she's bin a fidgitin and a looking out a winder all the blessed day, like a cat in a strange house? What do it matter to her if master bides away a week later nor what he put in his letter, if that's all—he's his own master, aint he? No, no, it mayn't a entered your poor brain, girl, it aint like it should; but I know that when folks is so mighty nice about things they never thought on afore, a turning out o' their beds slave's time, to get particular sort o' flowers, for somebody's study, and a dressing up different three or four times in a day, I know they 've got notions o' their own—pretty deep notions, too; not that I a' got anything to say agen 'em; she can't be much more mistress over things as Mrs. Dell than she is as Miss Addersley, for what I see.” And Cook, for she was the speaker, pursed her mouth and shook her head, as she loosed the strings of the little black work-bag before her.

That old kitchen, with its just washed and yet wet stones, and heavy window-blind swinging gently to and fro, and soft subdued light, was very cool and pleasant—for a kitchen—just then; and the little

searching wandering sunbeam, which peered in at the half-open door, grew tired of looking vainly for dirty corners; and amused itself by making mimic suns of every bright thing it came upon.

Cook, and Meggy the kitchen-maid, were sitting down at the opposite ends of the long table by the window; Meggy with a stocking and necklace of darning cotton, and Cook with her old black bag, with two knitting-needles sticking out. Many times that afternoon had she thus taken up her bag and put it down again just as she was drawing the strings, to execute some fresh order brought by Miss Addersley's maid, Jean. Altogether Cook's temper had been very much tried, and, as Meggy expressed it, "she had been in her Saturday humour all day long." And now, as at last Cook drew forth a number of little diamond-shaped dirty bits of knitting from the black bag, Meggy secretly rejoiced; for, well as she knew, on the one hand, that when Cook tied on a certain huge greasy apron, she must expect nothing but cuffs and abuse till she took it off again, so, on the other, she also knew that when those bits of dirty knitting appeared, she need fear nothing, if she did but show proper attention and sympathy till they were put up again. In truth, the greasy apron was only donned at busy times; and Cook seemed to have a firm opinion that it was impossible to prepare a good dinner, or at least for any one to enjoy it, unless she worked herself up the while to one of her Saturday humours, and rated and abused the cats and Meggy: for of her she thought little more than of them. "A poor mawkish-brained thing," she called

her, "as couldn't say Bo to a goose; ready enough to do her best, but what sort o' best is it? Why, one as beats a fool's worst—that's all!"

But when the bag was opened, and the bits of dirty knitting drawn one by one from it, each told its little story; and turned the current of Cook's thoughts, sometimes to a better channel, sometimes to a worse. One of the very dirtiest pieces told of watching all night at the bedside of an ailing child, where it had grown under weary fingers, for the sake of keeping weary eyes open. Another had been framed in a quiet parlour, behind a saddler's shop in the High-street of Leatham, and spoke of comfortable cups of tea there, and more comfortable expectations. Another, with tight-drawn stitches, spoke of disappointment, rage, and hopes dashed to the ground. Yes, plain bluff John Short ("other folks might call him Mr. Short, *she* wouldn't!") the saddler, had been very kind to Cook when she needed kindness much; and to her ailing little girl to the very last minute of her life, while they were neighbours; and he had liked to see Cook make herself at home in his parlour (John didn't mind her talking so long as he wasn't wanted to talk too); yet without knowing how, though all his neighbours guessed, he had managed to offend her past all forgiveness. The truth was, he had sent to her one day to ask her to come on to his shop in the course of the afternoon, as he had something very particular to communicate. She came—ribbons and bag, and knitting and all—and a great flutter she was in, making sure that the day she had so long expected had arrived, and that that parlour, with

the broad-bottomed chairs, and that duck of a round table, would be her own. She came, and sitting on one of the broad-bottomed chairs, with the tea-tray between them, and nice muffins still further to open the poor woman's heart (for she did enjoy a delicacy when anybody else cooked it), John Short informed her in about half-a-dozen words—taking bites of the well-buttered half-oily muffin between each, to save time—that the cook's salary and the kitchen of Bletchworth Hall could be hers for the asking. It was at that moment she knitted the bit with the tight-drawn stitches, which she was now taking out of the bag on the kitchen table. As she looked at it, and pulled it, vainly trying to get it to the same size as the others, Meggy looked out of the corners of her little eyes, and saw by the dark shade spreading over Cook's face, that her thoughts were already making for the back parlour of the saddler's shop in High-street, Leatham.

"John Short don't trouble hisself to come too soon," said she. "How does he know but what master's been a waiting for him since morning?" Cook eyed her suspiciously over her glasses for a minute, and then putting the bits together, which made a square half-yard towards the enormous counterpane they were to form, said—"But he aint been a waiting, has he? I see no call for hurry; let him take his time. Don't fret yourself," she added, contemptuously, as though it were poor Meggy that had been expecting him, and not herself; "he's only a biding his time till the good things is about."

"You never says a good word o' John Short," said Meggy; and then, half-repenting her own audacity,

she bustled away to lay a cloth at the end of the dresser, and to get out the cheese.

"O, I got nothing to say agin him," observed Cook, satirically, winding up her cotton, "only that he's a poor pitiable crittur as don't know his own mind. Yes, you're mighty anxious to see him set there a gorging, aint you? You'd make a pair, you would! His head goes too slow, and yours goes too fast. It's a pity you can't put 'em together, and make 'em even;—and a blessed even it u'd be!" Here Meggy dropped, or, as Cook said, pitched herself, into a chair, and throwing her apron over her head, went off in a prolonged hysterical fit of laughing.

"What! you're off agin, are you?" said Cook, getting up, and shaking Meggy vigorously by the shoulders, and slapping her back till she gasped for breath, and was still with exhaustion, which state Cook called "coming to."

"What's the matter?" asked a deep gruff voice at the door; "Meggy bad again?"

"O, you've come, have you?" was Cook's reply, as she sat down to her knitting, and pointed to Meggy's empty chair at the other end of the table; "you'd a mind not to hurry yourself."

John Short leisurely put his hat on a chair by the door, and then as leisurely took two strips of leather that hung on his arm, and placed them carefully across his hat. He then advanced, with slow careful steps, as though he doubted the floor being strong enough to bear his weight, took the proffered chair, and stared agape at Meggy; who, with her apron up to her mouth, was doing her utmost to prevent herself

going off again. He evidently wasn't a man to hurry himself: with that big heavy body and solemn close face, of which you could see he had no mean idea by the way in which a curl was brought down upon his cheek. He had a good broad forehead; and eyes which, though slow at travelling, were strong and bold; but the weakness of John Short's honest face was his mouth. It was not only larger than he could desire, but he could not keep it shut, do what he would. The lips were fresh-coloured, and always looked as if he had been eating bread and butter.

"There, get your mouthful," said Cook, "and don't take no notice of her tantantrums. I never see her like before. When she's once been off, like she was when you came, she won't give over a dithering, and a shaking, and a hawhawing, till she goes to bed; and then it's a chance if she don't bring it on worse by half-smothering herself to stop it."

"Not right here?" inquired John, putting his huge thumb to his forehead.

"Well," said Cook, doubtfully, glancing at Meggy's red shining face, in which the little twinkling eyes once more began to appear; "well, I'm sure that passes me to answer. I can't say as how she's downright struck, 'cause she don't have no queer fancies, such as talking to herself, or a getting up in the night, or a carrying a carving-knife in her pocket. And then as to work, bless you, she couldn't live without work, and she works well too; but then it's enough to turn a cat giddy to see the way she goes at it. Give her them steps to clean—which is her work, and very nice she keeps 'em—give her them to do, and

she'll rush at 'em as if she was going to knock down a mountain, and scour as if they'd all run away if she didn't get to the bottom by some out-of-the-way time that her poor racketty brain's fixed on."

"More trouble than her work's worth, I should say," remarked John Short, looking down on Meggy from Cook's own height of contemplation, as if she were some new and extraordinary animal about which he was puzzled and rather interested.

"Well, I don't know but what she is," replied Cook, smoothing out a new diamond of knitting on the table. "I don't mean to say but what she's well enough when you've got her quiet, to sit opposite you like that chiney tea-pot, listening to what you've got to say, and show you a bit o' feeling when you wants it; or if you've got a racking headache in the night with taddling over a great supper, she'll get up, though her legs is been going all the blessed day, and get you a cup of tea as nice as may be. But, bless you, it's a chance if her brain don't get the better of her afore she's done, and make her want to go faster nor her legs'll carry her, and then she'll fling herself forrads—tea and all—anywheres! That's her. She can fiddle-faddle over you when you aint well; but come a time when you're most 'mazed a getting up dinner, and this saucepan's a bilin' over, and that's a tippin' into the fire, and both your hands is taken up with them, and the hot cinders is just a tumbling into your gravy, call her then to give you a cloth or something to take hold of the pan with, and she'll come tearing up to you as if the chimney was a-fire, and plack her foot down on your gravy-pan, and pull

a bilin saucepan over you, and then, when she sees what she's done, instead o' making the best on it and helping to cure it, she'll just fling herself into a chair, and go off like that. But there, you can't do her no good; she's had her fit, and she'll bear the shakes on it till her next comes, which aint far off, I'll warrant. Get your morsel, man, do." And Cook bustled off with a jug to the cellar; for she was better pleased to-day with Mr. Short. He had listened with attention to her complaints about Meggy; and though he had uttered but three sentences since his entrance, yet, for him, he had been unusually loquacious; and, as Cook said to herself, as she stood between the two beer barrels in the cellar, "It's allus best to be on the safe side. There's no telling what's in his head yet; men *is* so deceitful!"

"Well, Mr. Short, and what's your town news?" said Cook, as she put the foaming jug before him, on her return.

"Got no *town* news," said Mr. Short, with his mouth full, bearing heavily upon the word "town."

"Then what's your country news?" inquired Cook, leaning back in her chair, and folding her arms expectantly. John finished his draught of ale, drew the back of one hand across his mouth, and took up a piece of fragrant greenish-looking old Cheshire with the other, in readiness, whilst he replied—

"'Twas old Symes, the tanner, that told me."

"That told you what?" said Cook testily; for the cheese was interrupting John's further utterance.

"What I'm going to tell you." But he stopped again, and Cook perceiving the cause—the opening of

the door leading into the long stone passage connecting the kitchen with the other apartments, and the entrance of Jean, leaned back defiantly in her chair, determined to be "worrised" no more by her or her mistress.

Jean pushed open the door with a quick, nervous jerk, and stood holding the handle. She looked young, yet it was hard to tell why, for there was no roundness in her figure, no fulness—no colour in her face; nothing of youth's ease and confidence, nothing of its grace and sensitiveness, in her manner. Her dress, of dark uncertain colour, fell round the long figure in spare folds, without a wrinkle in the tight-fitting body, or in the close old-fashioned sleeves. It came high up the long thin throat, and was finished off by a collar of white linen. Her hair was drawn tightly together at the back, and twisted in a knot. She gave you the impression of one who knew how to do just what was necessary in dress as a matter of necessity or duty, but who had lost all sense of womanly pleasure and pride in the doing. She said, without moving from the door, and not in a very pleasant voice, while her sharp grey eyes moved wanderingly about the kitchen, from John Short to the open kitchen door—

"Miss Addersley wishes some one to go up to Nor-worth on the mare, and see if the coach left at its usual time."

And the door shut again, and as the quick steps died away, Cook got up, and cramming all her knitting into the bag, said—

"Did you ever hear the like o' that? Why, the

coach can't a passed yet! That don't show notions, I s'pose? As sure as my name's Betsy Touch, it was a done thing before he went to the 'ilands, that they were to be married, and he's only been to have his outing fust, afore it's too late. Well, to be sure! to be sure! Well, I suppose nobody's got nothin' to say agin it; as far as I know she gies as good a name as she takes. Why, what ails the man? What are you guffawing about now?"

"'Twas Symes, the tanner, that told me," again began John, picking off the crumbs from his claret-coloured waistcoat.

"So you said afore," Cook replied tartly.

"Well, old Symes stopped at my place t' other day, and says he, 'Didn't you tell me Mr. Dell was gone to the Highlands?' 'Yes,' says I. 'Then he isn't,' says he; 'I saw him at Fallon, one hundred and nine miles from this, just outside a village, where I had been about some bark; he was trying to reach with his stick a flower from the top of the hedge, and there was a lady at his side who I'll swear wasn't a new acquaintance.'"

"Lor!" interrupted Cook, "and was he sure 'twas master?"

"He said so."

"And what was she like?"

"Well, I thought old Symes seemed ashamed to say how much he'd been struck with her face, it were so uncommon pretty." Here the passage door creaked a little; and John noticed, though Cook did not, that it had somehow become open while he talked. Cook, full of eager interest, exclaimed—

“Well?”

“I don’t know any more,” said John, glancing uneasily at the door, for it creaked again and swung wide open, while the kitchen door banged and the window-blind flapped to and fro. He looked along the passage, became determinedly silent, rose, took up his hat and strips of leather, hung them as before on his arm, said, “Good-bye, Cook; I must be at Leatham before dusk,” and strode solidly and slowly out.

What could it be that thus silenced him, and sent him off before the froth had altogether left his ale? Grim and ghastly things don’t usually haunt that passage; yet he had seen something which troubled him. Ha! it is still there! the elongated shadow of a female figure projected across the floor, and up the wall, both of which are bathed in vivid sunlight from some open, unseen door in the corridor which crosses the end of the passage. But John Short’s loud voice has ceased, he is gone, and—see! the shadow glides rapidly along the wall, growing smaller by degrees, and so also disappears. With the novelist’s privilege, we follow—catch a glimpse of a figure retreating through the corridor into the hall, where it stands for a moment in a blaze of light, uncertain and agitated. But that state passes, fast as we saw the shadow itself fly, and she seems to collect herself—sternly, calmly. The tall graceful form seems to dilate, the strong white brow to darken, the clear-cut profile to stand out more perfectly expressive of a resolved will.

Grace Addersley would be esteemed a beautiful woman, if there were not always something about her

that prevented the eye, or the thought, from resting on her beauty. That left arm, for instance, hanging down among the black soft folds of the velvet dress, is as perfect in shape and roseate whiteness as an arm well can be ; but there is such an almost manly strength in the clench of the hand, that one unconsciously expects to see sinewy cords in it. The same strength (though perhaps only for this moment) mars the beauty of the mouth, and of the meeting brows, crowned with plaits of rich pale brown hair. But, see ! the face is raised, and stretched forward as if listening to a distant sound, the hand is unclenched and lets fall a piece of delicate embroidery—it does not look accustomed to such work, but if you watch for a minute you will perceive how impossible it is for those hands to keep still—how necessary it is they should have some definite employment. It trembles now—just a little,—as it looses the golden chain about the swelling throat, and there is, I fancy, a quiver about the mouth as she opens the door, and stands again listening in the square porch. Hark ! Yes, there is the sound of horses' feet, and now Nero and the big pups are yelping as they never do yelp but for Mr. Dell, and after such an absence. They seem determined to yelp their very hearts out. Grace hears, and stands there in smiling expectancy—the elegant and once more thoroughly self-possessed hostess of Bletchworth Hall.

CHAPTER III.

MR. BLETCHWORTH DELL.

THERE are men in whom the natural powers spring up at their very birth in such healthy strength and harmonious balance, that they will go on growing without effort, apparently without seeming even to grow; become vigorous in body, energetic, able, and accomplished in mind, virtuous and disciplined in character, yet making no special, still less any worldly, use of these advantages; fit for everything, yet desiring nothing beyond what they already possess—the happiness of life; be thoroughly individual, and yet pass among the crowd without notice; looking on that crowd with quick observing eyes that penetrate to depths undreamed of in the said crowd's philosophy, while themselves but adding in general estimation (perhaps in their own too) another insignificant item to the mighty mass of insignificance.

Such was Mr. Bletchworth Dell, whose form, scarcely reaching in height the ordinary standard, and getting decidedly rounder than he wished it to be, was so graceful in movement, so manly-looking, and, at times, so dignified in expression, and whose face, while destitute of all pretension to regularity of outline, was so impressed in its tender flexibility, in its

rapid successions of light and shade, with what seemed at least to be a rich and unceasing flow of thought and feeling, that one could not help being drawn to the conclusion that both form and face must have been moulded into their present shapes and happy union with each other, by a particularly happy spirit beneath. Mr. Dell was certainly the very picture of an enjoyable man, provided only you mean by that to express the enjoyment which refines and cultivates life, and makes it instinctively grateful, and brings it into harmony with the thousand forms of encircling being, the endless procession of visible things that seem to whisper, "Eden is not yet all lost to the world, if the world will but open its eyes and purify its heart to see." Yes, Mr. Dell was a happy, enjoyable, fortunate, and altogether most enviable man; and if he really had ever met with one severe trouble in his lifetime, he had either quite forgotten the circumstance, or remembered it only to enhance the sense of his satisfaction at getting rid of so unwelcome a visitor: you could plainly see that in his whole aspect and behaviour.

But it is not good to be too comfortable. So, perhaps, Mr. Dell felt now, and apparently was resigned in consequence, as he weighed over in his mind the probable results of his return home after an unusually prolonged absence, and shaped out in detail the kind of conversation he intended to hold with his cousin Grace. His thoughts evidently perplexed him; and yet, somehow, when they became too perplexing, there would flow in a suggestion, as from some fresh quarter, that seemed to clear away all

clouds in an instant, and bring back more than the old animated glow. Oh! decidedly something more than that! Yet still the perplexity was troublesome, the thoughts it raised stuck like burrs to his mental garment, and as fast as he removed them from one part they appeared to be only the more inextricably lodged in another. Well, well, he must make a bold plunge.

But—O Mr. Dell! was it a bold plunge to go timidly round by the stables and back entrance, when you knew, or might have known, that Grace, as her old habit was, waited you expectantly, at the porch of the front entrance? Was it boldness—when you did meet her in the hall, and she advanced with such graceful, impressive, warm cordiality to greet you, and you looked for the moment so delighted to see her, that you then relapsed, and did *not* give her that kiss of kindly familiarity with which you ever before greeted her after any unusual separation? Was it excess of boldness that made you (O Mr. Dell! I am ashamed that I have spoken so much good testimony of you!) become so silent and unresponsive; and so eager to welcome any little bit of unmeaning gossip that might start up, in your first talk, as you and Grace took your way together into the room she had prepared for you, instead of saying to her, as you had sworn to yourself you would say, the few sentences which would at all events prevent misconception any longer on some serious point of your mutual relations? And that preparation:—O lover of antique old rooms, and of the charming and fruitful associations between past and present life that skilful and patient fingers can weave together unsuspected, and leave hanging

all about the very atmosphere when you think you are surrounded only by furniture, and books, and pictures, and statuettes!—O enjoyer of all that is most enjoyable among the so-called good things of life!—what would not you and I give when decidedly hungry, body and soul, as Mr. Dell is—and the dinner-hour far distant,—to be taken by the hand of a beautiful maiden and led into such a room as now waits that worthy gentleman? who, however—troubled perhaps still by those mental burrs I have spoken of—does not, I fear, just now deserve so much delicate and ill-requited attention. Look at that room steadily. It is his own, forming the ground-story of the relic of the old moated mansion; his darling room, where he has loved to paint, and to read, and to muse over his cigar, and to chat with Grace, and to dream with her of an ambitious future: your genuine dreamer not only doesn't object to dream of active life, he likes it; 'tis a fearful joy, snatched as it were out of the enemy's camp. Here, too, in bright dewy mornings, and fervent afternoons, and tender twilight evenings, he has gradually fallen into the habit of taking his meals with Grace in a quiet cosy way, when there have been no visitors, and when Mrs. Addersley, who is a great invalid, has kept her chamber. Grace has hitherto not been so fond of this room as Mr. Dell. To-day their feelings would seem to be reversed; such care, and forethought, and tact has she shown in making the most of the old place, while he —. But never mind him just now, if he is determined to be ungrateful. Let us glance at the place, and at Grace's handiwork. It is a very long, rather low, but decidedly

broad room, extending from the three-sided bay window in front to the inner court behind, which you cannot see now on account of the high screen that encloses that end, and forms it into one of the pleasantest studios that ever painter revelled in. The dark floor gleams again, every here and there, with the brilliant polish ; and along the carved and richly-panneled dark wainscot walls, stand out the touches of colour and gilding that mark the heraldic devices of a single row of shields of arms ; each surmounted with the upraised panther paw of the Bletchworth family. The centre of the room is bare of furniture ; in fact, there are merely two very ancient and old-fashioned chairs, with red velvet cushions and heavy gold fringes, both richly carved and dark, and illuminated with coloured and gilded coats of arms like the walls. They stand one on each side the low broad fire-place, which is surrounded by the story of Joseph and his Brethren, told in wood carvings. At least they say so. I own I can myself only see confused groups of figures in high relief, with delicious bunches of grapes and bouquets of flowers at intervals, connected together by scroll-work, that may mean tendrils. Over the fire-place hangs forward the portrait of Lady Rosamond Bletchworth, the alleged great beauty of the family. And you can still see the pout of the lips, and the wondering arch of the eye-brows, and the waspish waist. Time has been cruel to all the rest. Facing this, over the door (as you will see on turning round), is a pair of antlers of extraordinary span and I don't know how many tines ; and they do say (though I am suspicious of family

notions of this kind) there is somewhere a letter from King James' own secretary, referring to a present of venison that was made by royalty to Sir Richard Bletychworthe in the year of his mayoralty: and lo, —the very antlers in proof! But it is not to any of these things, you may be sure, that Grace leads the way. No, nor even to Mr. Dell's studio, though she has a surprise for him there—she has conferred on him, in her pity for bachelor-hooded helplessness, the unimaginable blessing of putting everything to rights, without hurting a hair of the heads of his incipient cherubs and Venuses. But see, they pause at the further end of the room, there, where all is light, and colour, and delicate suggestion for the refreshment of spirit and frame. Through that vast three-sided expanse of window there seems hardly any actual end to the room. It melts into the garden and the blue sky beyond, which are, in a word, visible fairy-land, veiled only by those flower-studded lace curtains, which the breeze lifts—oh! so luxuriously and displayingly from the ground as though the better to look at them, and then lets them fall again with gentle measured motion, that will not even shake off the ripe seeds of the mignonette that perfumes the whole air from the long boxes within the window sills. But now the breeze grows bolder, again lifts them—nay, tries to carry them off through the open window, but fails, and lets them sail back with sweet gifts and messages from the lawn, among them the odour as of a breath—a tender sigh—sent to the lovely moss-rose in yonder splendid porcelain vase from its companion left behind, as lovely and as lonely, to bloom on the

parent twig. But look upon the ceiling of this bay ; aye, it is there the mediæval artist has exhausted his skill and power, for there it could be best looked on and enjoyed. That pendant is a miracle of airy lightness and construction, hanging directly over the centre of the round inlaid table ; which is itself a study, for the innumerable pieces and the infinite variety of hues and forms of the patterns : the whole made from the timbers and carvings that were preserved by Sir Richard from the wreck of the other parts of the mansion. But it is not the table itself, nor the pendant over it, nor the deep rich colours of the foreign carpet beneath, so happily contrasted with the polished plainness of the rest of the floor, so moss-like to the tread, and in which Mr. Dell's chair has its legs embedded—no, it is not these things we care now to dwell on ; who could, after the first glimpse of all that the table bears ? The sparkling spring water in the costly crystal jug, so exquisite in form, and balanced on the opposite side by its twin sister, filled with claret ; the tender, almost yellow hue of the crust of the home-made little odd-shaped loaves ; the pigeon-pie, with a crust so light that it might have been put together by a feather-touch, instead of by the hands that will fall so heavily upon poor Meggy (this, O philosophers ! is but one of the inscrutable mysteries, and equally inscrutable compensations, of Nature) ; the lettuce fresh and crisp, and glittering wet from its bath ; the tall blanc-mange shaking and shivering for its life (tempting the mouth by its very cowardice) ; the pile of strawberries—ah, take one, if but to know the flavour that can be added to such a

size by good gardening; the raspberries, buried and bleeding beneath a burden of clotted cream; the dish of junket, and the piece of fresh honeycomb, with the honey streaming out like the waters of some mimic land of Goshen. Ah, Mr. Dell, there is indeed, I fear, something on your mind if you can be insensible to all this! And those flowers overtopping all! shedding their last breath thus that you may draw yours somewhat more luxuriously; that you may, while eating in their presence, turn the bread into the ripe cornfield and poppy fringe, the water into running and babbling streams, the cream into daisied and gold-cupped meadows, the lettuce and the fruit into that universal garden of the world God has given us, and from which Grace has plucked them for the mere chance of your gratification. Ah, Grace, if ever woman knew how to take measure of a man's tastes and fancies, you do now. Beware, Mr. Dell! you have a harder task before you than you have chosen to think!

He cannot eat—at least he thinks not; but then he remembers it will be harder still to talk, so he accepts Grace's smiling and good-humoured invitation (so oft repeated) to taste something. He takes just what she pleases, a little pigeon-pie and a glass of wine, and he dallies with both, very much in the manner of Amine the mysterious, when she partook of the rice at her husband's supper-table. And at last Grace, tired of being so warmly thanked, and so often called "Cousin," or "Dear Cousin," instead of the more familiar appellation—Grace, began to take the initiative.

Her voice broke on the ear like low-thrilling music, measured and artificial perhaps, but the sentences coming one after another like so many musical cadences of speech. One might listen to her with pleasure (in certain moods) without stopping to reflect upon the meaning of a single word she said. In fact, Mr. Dell himself would have chosen that precise mode of listening now, had it been practicable and right; unfortunately it was neither.

“Well, cousin, if I cannot administer much comfort to your bodily wants, let me see whether I have the art to be more successful in another direction.”

“Nay, my dear Grace,” began he, apologetically, fearing she was hurt.

“See—here is a letter from your uncle, Sir George Dell, which arrived shortly after your departure, and which I opened as you wished me. Referring to your application to him, respecting an opening into public life, he writes most gratifyingly; in fact, he makes no doubt he can obtain for you the position of private secretary to one of the ministers. But there is a difficulty.”

“Ha!” broke in Mr. Dell, quite cheerily under the circumstances.

“He thinks you should be in parliament.”

“Oh, undoubtedly. Yes, Grace, he is quite right, as I could soon show you. It’s a thousand pities, certainly, to lose so fine a chance, but—”

“It is, indeed; after our long consultations, and plannings, and hopings, and despairings about the compassing of this first step—”

“But you know, Grace, ’tis the part of all true

philosophy to resign one's self to what is clearly unavoidable."

"Come, come, you must look lady Fortune more boldly in the face, or she will never be won. You do not know, my dear cousin, half her bounty to you."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Dell, and the tone contrasted oddly with that cheery "Ha!" with which he had heard there was a difficulty.

"Yes: Mr. Nicholas Rudyard, the brewer of Leatham, called here one day to see you, and we had a good deal of chat together. Knowing your views and wishes, I sounded him. At first he was very shy, but when I dropped a word or two about Sir George Dell's letter he changed at once, and before he left the Hall he had not only promised you his support and influence, but pledged himself for your success, at the next election."

"Is it possible! Why, really this does seem like—" and there Mr. Dell started up, took a turn or two through the room, Grace calmly but steadily watching him. Presently he returned, and resuming his seat, said,

"My dear Grace, I cannot tell you how grateful I feel in my heart for all your kindness and forethought, and for your brilliant success in my behalf; but, were there no other objections, consider one moment this: you know my fortune is very limited, and that elections are very costly."

"Mr. Rudyard also pledges himself there shall be no heavy expenses."

"Heavy! he is a rich man. He would probably think a thousand or fifteen hundred pounds, every now and then, a mere trifle."

“He guaranteed to me the whole should not exceed three hundred pounds. Come, dismiss all these excellent precautions, all these unnecessary alarms. Take, and enjoy, your good fortune. You have now your own fate in your hands—power, influence, wealth, splendour, possibly high rank,—certainly a most enviable career, and one that will give you boundless opportunities for doing good in your own way; all, in fact, that we have both so long dreamed of and talked over in this room.”

Again Mr. Dell got up, and strode up and down the room. Grace saw her advantage, and continued—

“If you were one of those men fit only to manage a parish instead of legislating for a nation, who know not how wisely to spend the wealth that may be slowly acquired; who would use corruptly or selfishly the great social advantages that God places in their hands in trust for others; who have no inner strength for the work, but must be propped, and buttressed, and stimulated from without—”

“Which is decidedly my case, I own. It is useless any longer for me, Grace, to disguise the fact, that all my ambitious aspirations have died out. What I might be if I threw myself into public life with stern determination to succeed, I know not. I have vanity enough to acknowledge, if you will push me too hard, that my belief is I should succeed. But why should I peril my present content—and—” he was going to say “happiness,” but something instinctively noble and kindly arrested the word, for he knew he was shattering into terrible ruin the dreams of his cousin; his cousin whom he fondly loved as a cousin, whom he

had thought once he loved not merely in that relation, the able, brilliant, beautiful, musical-voiced woman before him, who had been labouring for his advancement so patiently, while he had been—but his inward thought stopped there, and he resumed his discourse.

“No,” said he, after a pause, “why should I peril all that I now possess to embark in a new and thorny career? Are not my duties marked out for me? To live the life of the country gentleman; become a magistrate—I hope an efficient one; try to improve my neighbours, tenants, and labourers by the same essential processes that will improve myself; help the poor, educate the ignorant, cherish the aged; work steadily at something to fill up my leisure hours. You know I dream of art, and that dream *is* worth pursuing, aye, even if one knows from the outset it will only be a dream; and these things done, why should I not then enjoy what God’s bountiful hand has given me? Come, Grace, own that I am practically in the right. Give up labouring in the cause of such an ingrate as I have proved myself; but do it so that I may feel at ease. Renounce with me, as you cherished with me, these feverish dreams of political and public life.”

“And how would you tempt me to do so?” inquired Grace, with a tone and look impossible to analyse, but which made the blood rush into Mr. Dell’s conscious face; and then, when it retreated, there was an equally conscious gloom. Luckily Jean came in at the moment with coffee, and both the disputants were awhile silenced.

Mr. Dell bent low over the strawberry-stalks in his

plate, measuring, perhaps, the ground he had yet to traverse to get into a harbour of peace and mental satisfaction, when he suddenly raised his head, as if listening to some distant sound; his eye kindled, his face brightened with its natural joyousness, and, forgetting everything else, he started up, ran to the window, and leaned far out. In an instant the head was withdrawn, as he called aloud—

“Grace, Grace! quick! the hounds are out! See!” She went and stood behind him, her lip curling as she marked his delight. They passed at one corner on the right, so near to the Hall that he could hear their hard breathing and the rustle of the dry dock-leaves as they plunged among them. And then he grasped her arm, and held his breath, while, with blood-red tongues dropping to the ground and blood-shot eyes, the dogs for one moment crossed his sight. Presently a horseman also passed, and gave a cheery cry to Mr. Dell, whom he recognised as he galloped along. Grace’s lip curled still more markedly; and a smile of bitter scorn passed over her face; and she felt that in mind and wishes he was no longer hers, possibly no longer hers in any way that she would care to value. When they returned to the table she determined to bring matters to a speedy crisis. But Mr. Dell had by this time righted himself, and anticipated her.

“Grace,” said he, with his old frank laugh, heard for the first time to-day, “here has been a deal of beating about the bush—I mean on my part; so let me say at once, I came back determined to tell you honestly that for some time past I had changed my views of life, and had determined to settle, and—”

here Grace's penetrating look fell upon him with tenfold intensity, and though he could not stand her gaze, he finished his sentence—"and marry." And then hurrying along as though over very, very tender ground, he continued, "And you too, Grace, will, I hope, ere long follow my example, and find some man worthy of you, and whom I may look on as a brother."

Grace listened in silence. The coffee-cup shook just a little in the fine, long, jewelled hand, but that was all. She looked at him a moment, rose, and left the room. Mr. Dell knew well it was her habit to conceal emotion, and he feared she was much moved. Why? Unhappily he could not conceal from himself that there had been for a long time past a sort of tacit feeling, (understanding it could not be called, for no word of love had ever passed between them) that they would, in all probability, become man and wife. And while Grace was near him, and her mental and rousing influence was upon him, he had grown accustomed to look upon a future of that kind as very desirable; at times even he had fancied he loved Grace. But it was precisely because he had never felt sure of it that he had said nothing to her. Then, too, he began by degrees to fancy she loved power better than anything else, and that did not draw him nearer to her in heart. As he now looked after her he began to question with himself whether he had done her justice in that respect? Did she, after all, really love him? The momentary fear thus raised gave him a deeper pang than he had ever before experienced. Alas! he had recently learnt something

on such subjects, which deepened his sympathies for Grace. He thought to himself—should he follow her? What was she doing now? What saying to herself? What thinking of him, for whom she had evidently worked with such devotion? But he could not answer these questions. And while he paused, and said, “Well I have got the worst over; all I have now to do is to soften the blow,” other, and for some time forgotten, associations, came back upon him in a fresh wave of delight. He gradually dropped back in his chair, crossed his legs, put the tips of his fingers together, half-closed his eyes, and seemed to see already the end of all his trouble,—nay, to feel fairly got to the other side of it, and to be in possession of the goal that he saw rising like a fair tower of guidance, high and dazzling to his yearning eyes.

“Cousin!” He started—Grace was again standing before him. “I interrupted you: don’t mind it. You can understand I felt somewhat to see all our plans at an end. But no matter; go on. As your cousin I feel interested in knowing your views. Come, you will marry, you say; I will help you out. You have seen some one, and it is she who has dispersed, as by magic, the castles in the air we erected so slowly and laboriously. Is it not so?”

“It is.” What further confessions he might have made I cannot say, for the door now opened, and Grace’s mother, Mrs. Addersley, entered. Poor Mr. Dell! he was glad to see her for once, though she was no favourite of his. She had an Indian air about her face and dress, dark complexion, shrivelled yellow hands, covered with rings (hands that had, on more

than one occasion, taken up the whip for a negro slave); little beady black eyes, with a restless, impertinent stare; and she was wrapped in furs and shawls even on this, one of the most glorious of summer days. Mr. Dell hastened to meet her, to shut down the windows, and place her in his own seat. After some brief welcomings he said to her, suddenly,—

“I have been telling Grace that, for some time past, I had come to the determination to marry and settle.”

“Quite right! quite right!” interrupted Mrs. Addersley; “I knew it would come to that at last. I told Grace so when I saw her pining away in secret about you—”

“Mamma!” exclaimed Grace.

“Oh, Mr. Dell won't mind knowing now; of course he'll be glad. Well, I congratulate you both, and God bless you! How very cold it is! Perhaps you'll excuse me, or come up to my room by-and-bye. I know you don't want me.” So, with a self-satisfied laugh, she hurried off, leaving Mr. Dell in a state of embarrassment such as I will not attempt to describe; and as to Grace—but she always was more or less inexplicable, and she had motives now for not even quite understanding herself. After a while, however, she rose from the distant seat in the corner to which she had retreated, came to the chair on which Mr. Dell sat, and with wonderful courage and straightforwardness said to him, as she rested her hand on his shoulder, and one hot tear rolled down her cheek, which was just a little more suffused with colour than usual—

“I know what you feel, my own dear, kindly, good cousin. Mamma has done me irreparable harm by her random thoughts and careless speech.”

Mr. Dell rose too, the fair fingers still resting on his shoulder, while his hand took her other hand very tenderly, and he said, “Before you go any further, tell me this, in satisfaction to my own conscience and future peace of mind; I ask you solemnly, and desiring only the truth,—have I done aught towards you that is unbecoming a gentleman or a man of honour? Have I knowingly in any way misled you?”

“No—no—no. But bear with me a few moments. When, after my father’s death, your offer of a new home reached me in a foreign land, it touched me very deeply. Through all the subsequent voyage, I could not but daily read, and re-read that kindly letter, so full of manly sympathy, and guess and speculate as to you, your mind, your home, your future. We met. I found you—well, I will not dwell on those, my first impressions, for I mastered them, in order that I might study you dispassionately. I admired you much; and I saw, I think more truly than any one else, your talent, and fine, and rare powers. But I saw they were running to waste. I tried to show you this, and, as I believed, succeeded. And then we communed together: and I learned from you, oh! infinitely more in a thousand ways than I had taught you. By degrees I could think of nothing, dream of nothing, but your interests. The world seemed to have nothing in it of the slightest value that did not—I—that is—”

Here the musical cadences, which had been indeed very, very sweet (Mr. Dell was more carried away by them and their meaning than he would have liked to acknowledge), suddenly stopped; and the fair form quivered with long and still repressed emotion. At last there was a passionate gush of tears, and a cry of agony; and she was breaking away from Mr. Dell's side, but that he arrested and supported her, his arm now gliding round her waist.

"Oh, Grace!" said he, with an emotion scarcely less than her own, "Oh, Grace! had I known all this earlier, things might—yes, I believe in my soul they might have ended differently; but now, you know, it is impossible."

"Impossible!" replied Grace, looking round at him with a pathos and an inexpressible tenderness in her voice, "Ah, cousin! is it—really impossible?" Poor Grace, she would not anticipate the impending blow—but it came now:

"I am married. My wife comes home to-night."

CHAPTER IV.

GRACE TAKES THE KEYS FOR THE LAST TIME.

YES, Mr. Dell was married. That was the secret that he had come home to tell unto Grace, before bringing the bride ; and which he had found it so hard to declare as he saw the welcome that she had prepared for him ; as he heard of the success with which she had promoted his ambitious desires ; as he learned, through the unexpected revelations of Mrs. Addersley, that Grace really loved him ; and, worst of all, as he learned it in Grace's own presence.

Well, the truth was out at last, she knew it now :— he was *married*. The absences from home that had occurred so frequently of late, under the name of sketching tours, were all explained. Yes, there was an end for ever to the day-dreams in which Grace Addersley had for a long time indulged ; day-dreams in which she had seen Mr. Dell, her husband, rising, step by step, to high office in the government ; animated and sustained by her skill and determination ; and, herself, through him, exercising, by virtue of her talent, beauty, and position, a political power and a social influence that were not a jot the less sweet to her in idea, that they would not be formally recognised. For the reality of power she

cared much; for the semblance very little. But both were gone at a blow! The honoured and brilliant wife of the future minister of England was reduced suddenly to her true self—Grace Addersley. The maiden love that had advanced so far as almost to woo, was rejected. The ambition that was to have mastered the world, had failed miserably in its first attempt to cope with one single unit of it. At the precise moment when she had brought all things to a climax of promise, and waited her reward—he had married another! Grace Addersley heard as one might hear a death knell. She fell—crushed utterly. Sick in heart;—humiliated to the extremest depths of humiliation by her self-exposures, made so uselessly;—burning with a wild sense of outrage;—shaken by tumultuous throbs of a blind instinct for vengeance;—she yet preserved, characteristically, a kind of tower of outlook in her soul, from whence she could survey the war of her own frenzied passions, and guide them in any direction that might still whisper—hope!

How that next half-hour passed, neither Grace nor Mr. Dell could ever accurately recall. Her silence was terrible. The very air seemed to grow thicker and thicker as Mr. Dell waited; listening for words that came not; for some manifestation of life that was not vouchsafed to him, by that rigidly-fixed upright form, as it sat in the chair into which it had dropped as the fatal words were heard. He began to feel suffocated. He tried, himself, to break the silence, but could not. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. A butterfly came flickering in through

the window—passed between and round them both—settled for a moment on his sleeve—and went off again—and the very fact was almost unknown to him—until it revived in his subsequent recollections, and told him how they had both sat there, under the terrible shadow of that revelation.

But oh—the relief at last when Grace came up to him holding out both her hands ;—and, wonderful to say, letting loose her silvery laugh!—rarely heard, but always making a kind of light in the place where it was,—and saying to him :—

“Cousin, why did you not tell me at first? Why not have spared me all this foolish exhibition? But come—we are cousins still, are we not?” Mr. Dell clasped and fervently kissed the delicate long-fingered hand—and felt an almost devout thankfulness that his trouble was over.

“But now, cousin,” continued Grace, “one last word. This is not a topic for us ever to speak of again ;—ever—if we can help it—think of again. I am but a woman—and have a woman’s weakness. You will not let the knowledge of the extent of that weakness pass from you?” There was so much of beauty in the face, music in the tones, and pathetic expression in the manner with which this was said, that Mr. Dell would have given worlds to have assured her that he did not—could not—recognise the “weakness” she spoke of in her love for him ; and that he would feel himself the basest of wretches if he ever allowed the faintest suspicion of the fact to reach others ; but he was obliged to content himself by showing what he felt in his broken husky voice and

eloquent gestures, and by an appeal to her in return :—

“Grace, you will show me that all this is—really ended—as—we both—now—wish it to be, by continuing to look upon this as your home?—unless, indeed, you would for your own happiness’ sake, prefer to go away.”

“Well—no—cousin—I should not like to acknowledge matters had gone so far—do not be too vain! Enough—we understand each other.” Again she held out the fair hand, and again Mr. Dell clasped it in his own.

“Well—now, tell me—your wife—where have you left her?”

“At the little wayside inn at Upper Leatham.”

“Make haste then! Leave me to prepare. Be assured she shall not complain of her welcome.” She laid one hand on the bell-rope, and took a great bunch of keys from a basket with the other, and as she went out of the door she looked at them with a strange cold smile wreathing her lips.

CHAPTER V.

THE NEW MISTRESS.

IT was at twelve, the first morning of the following week, that Mr. Short had promised to bring home the new side-saddle for the mare ; and sure enough, just as the old Dutch clock had done striking, he appeared at the kitchen door with it on his arm.

Though the window and the outer door of the dairy were open, that kitchen was like an oven just then. Cook, in her apron of office, and with her cap pinned up by the strings in a jaunty way at the top of her head, was surrounded by trays of unbaked pastry, dishes of currants, and little round baskets, some stained and empty, and some still uncovered, with the fruits of various kinds appearing through the layers of leaves, just as Proby, the gardener, had brought them in. Meggy, who bore more than one white impression of Cook's floury hand on her back, sat hanging as it were upon her sovereign's dread looks, and buttering the while the patty pans that were piled up in a heap before her. It was an awful time in the kitchen just then. Rebecca, the pert housemaid, knew it, and did not loiter, when she had occasion to look in—or when, as cook put it, “she must flaunt her red ribbons there to see what was a going forrads.”

"Morning, Cook! How do you find yourself after the storm last night?" said Mr. Short with a gracious smile, his lips growing very fresh as he looked round on the unusual display of good things.

"Now then, take this tray,—not you, Meg, you set still if so be it's possible. Here, you whats-er-name, if you an't afeared o' melting them wax fingers o' yours—for it's rather warm—take this tray, and set it down on the stones in the dairy—d'ye hear? What are you gapin at? As if you'd never set eyes on a mortal man afore! Now, John Short, if you'd have the goodness to let the girl go past." And this was the only answer Cook deigned to make to the saddler's greeting.

"Warm here!" said he; again venturing to speak, while putting his saddle and hat on the chair by the door, and wiping his face with his blue handkerchief spotted with orange; and apparently not otherwise troubling himself about Cook's change of manner.

"What!" cried Cook, turning to Rebecca, "What, a standin playin with them purty fingers agin, are you? Don't you hear the man a spellin for his beer? And can't you get his pot down?"

Mr. Short's pot was a yellow pint mug with a brown rim round it, representing fat little Bacchuses sporting with bundles of grapes, as big as themselves. John's eye twinkled at the remark. He had got to love that mug. So many and many a time had he drank from it, that it had become practically in his eyes a kind of perennial fountain—flowing ever (or, what was the same thing, whenever he wanted it), with John's earthly nectar, good strong ale. Cook

now rubbed the clinging paste from her fingers with a handful of dry flour, snatched the mug from Rebecca's hand, and let herself down the cellar stairs. Then Mr. Short, seeing all fair before him, took up his coat tails, and slowly and cautiously lowered himself into a chair, at his old place at the end of the dresser; and while he looked about him, and sniffed enjoyingly and refreshingly the damp casky smell from the cellar, and looked upon the fresh brown loaf and the crumbling cheese—richer even than his own imagination painted it—and thought of the long walk he had had through the hot sun, he sighed a sigh of deep anticipatory gratification, while chuckling in his secret heart over his own forethought and skill in securing the friendship of the mistress of the hall-kitchen. He didn't mind Cook's hasty words—or changeable moods—but he did very much approve of her excellent October-brewed ale. He turned to look at Meggy; never dreaming it was she who, before his coming, when Cook's back was turned, had made a desperate charge at the dresser drawer, torn out that snowy cloth, and spread it, with shoulders convulsively heaving up and down. She now sat demurely quiet; her red face screwed as far round on her neck as it could well go, to get away from the place where he sat; as though, in her crazy imagination, she felt his solemn puzzled look fixed upon her all the time.

“Well, I do like a drop of good beer,” said John Short, emphatically, as Cook, returning, placed the full mug before him.

Cook smiled a grim smile.

"And I will say there isn't better beer in all the county." And John took hold of the handle.

"Malt and hops, Cook; genuine malt and hops, and plenty of 'em—that's my motto." He blew aside the froth. "None of your gimcrack drinks for me—your wines, or your foreign and Frenchified liquors, with all sorts of queer names. Good health, Cook, and may you always brew ale like this." He drank—deeply, for John was like a waggon on a slope, that must go some distance when fairly put in motion—but he paused with a strong effort, backed himself as it were, set down the mug, rose to his feet, and, looking unutterable things at Cook, murmured to himself, "Small beer, by—!" I do not think John was ever so near to an imprecation before; but, he stopped in time; contenting himself with another long look at Cook; perhaps accompanying it with some internal blessing.

"Tut—tut, man," exclaimed Cook shortly, and plunging the great poker into the fire, with a pang of remorse, "get your bit, man—get your bit—you're welcome. But don't set there speechifying as if you was at a meetin. You loses the only good pint you've got when you finds your tongue." Cook had had her say—she had enjoyed her joke—and felt she had been thoroughly successful in both. But like other and greater potentates, she seemed to find a dash of something unsatisfactory in the flavour of her triumph. John didn't reproach her—didn't quarrel with her—nay, he ate submissively the bread and cheese, and even looked once speculatively into the half-emptied mug—but no—his moral being couldn't

stand that—"No more of that!" he said to himself very determinedly; "and now, Missus Cook," said he also to himself, "look out!"

"I say," cried Cook, turning to the girls, with the poker in her hand, "have either of you beauties bin to tell your master the saddle's come? Of course they haven't!" she continued, addressing Mr. Short; "though they know their missus has been trailin about in her ridin gown all the blessed mornin awaiting it." Rebecca jumped up, crammed her red hair into her cap, and hurried off through the passage door.

"But there," said Cook, flinging down the poker, so as to make poor Meggy jump affrighted to her feet: "It's the same with all the gals now-a-days, they think heads is only made to stick fine caps on."

"The new missus has got a sweet tooth, I should say," remarked Mr. Short—feeling it necessary, for about the first time in his life, to say something; and seeing another tray-full of delicacies drawn from the oven.

"Lord bless you, they're going a partying it to-night in a small way, before they gives a grand to-do next week," said Cook, sitting down with a snowy round board in her lap, and cutting a number of tiny bars from a thin piece of paste. "I don't say it's any business o' mine," she went on, lowering her voice, "but it wouldn't take a witch to tell what'll come to the place with a young thing scarce out o' pinafores, a missusing it about. If she'd leave things as she don't understand to them as does, well and good; but, bless you, she's in and out—in and

out—like a cat before a shower, from mornin to night. Why, Miss Addersley never showed her face only just to give orders for dinner. And I'll tell you what comes o' people interfering where they don't understand. Ha' done, scrunching them cherry-stones, Meg! Be so good as to give her a knock o' the head for me, Mr. Short. My hands itches to do it. Lor! there she is, off agin! Did you ever see such a bit of tinder in all your life? With them stones in her mouth too. Plague take the girl—she'll choke herself! Put 'em out, Meg, d'ye hear? Put 'em out, do! There! Don't let me catch you at that fun agin in a hurry—you young hussy—you! Let's see, what was I a saying? If she aint enough to aggravate a saint. Oh, about the milk. She—missus I mean—stops at the door there, when they came in from their walk last night; and says she, in a solemn way, as she looked upwards, 'Cook, we're going to have a storm. I've seen it hanging about for days. We shall have it in earnest now. You'll have to wait for to-morrow's milk for the junket, I fear, but you *may* save this by taking it down below.' 'Storm, ma'am?' says Proby, 'it's far off yet.' 'Oh,' says Miss Grace, 'Cook understands the dairy.' 'Yes—yes,' chimes in master, 'leave Cook alone for her junket.' 'Well, we shall see,' says missus, laughing; 'only mind, Cook, whoever is right is to have her way next time.' Well, this mornin, milk's turned; as o' course it would be after such a night as that, so she got the laugh on her side. But how did she know a storm was coming any more than me or Proby?—why she didn't; she guessed it,

as a baby might—and o' course Providence couldn't go out of its way to show her she were wrong. Why what's the matter with the man—are you struck?"

Well, yes; John has even for a moment forgotten the small beer, as he listens; with the bit of cheese, stuck on the point of his knife, remaining midway betwixt the plate and the open mouth. And Meggy, too, what is it that makes those little eyes of hers grow bigger than one might have supposed it was possible for them to become? Even Cook, though she does rage inwardly to see Meggy's trembly red hands for a moment doing nothing, cannot find it in her heart to let her own voice jar upon that sweet, spring-like, bird-like music, that comes bubbling towards them.

Sigh'd the Snowdrops, "Who will miss us
When the happy air shall thrill
At thy presence, pale Narcissus,
At thy gleam, O Daffodil?"

Like the breaking of a merry little wave among the rushes, her voice had risen, and then stopped, as the doors opened, and Mrs. Dell came in; and after telling Mr. Short, who stood up, with knife, cheese, and mouth all precisely in the same relative attitude to each other as before, to sit still, she paused; with one little foot perched on the fender, looking gravely down upon Meggy; who dithered and fidgetted about, more than ever, as she felt those bright, beautiful, sunny eyes glowing, as it were, upon her red hands and awkward body.

The grey riding-habit fell in small precise folds

from the dainty waist. She wore a white linen collar; and a bow of broad rose-coloured ribbon threw a faint vermilion tinge upon the dimpled chin. What a coquettish little chin it was! And what a baby-face altogether it seemed; at least on your first glance, and until you met the direct gaze of those earnest—wonderfully earnest eyes, and felt instinctively the calm strength of the broad, white, beautiful brow above. You found it hard to tell then whether that face had most of the serious woman in it, or of the playful child that had never yet taken unto itself the meaning of the word—care. And as to all that dry, light hair of hers, that went rippling off in tiny waves to the one great swelling billow that rested on the neck, it seemed really to live and breathe and laugh in the sunshine; and to change with every expression of her face. On the whole, in spite of the tiny cluster of almost imperceptible freckles between the nose and the large blue eyes, I suppose the old folks were right in thinking their Winny a beauty. If so, then hers was the mischievous, dimpled, April-morning beauty of the two-year old darling. And somehow the mother had never managed to disentangle her mind from the idea of that infant time,—of the little toddling feet, and the tiny red morocco shoes. “How the child grows!” she said then. At sixteen it was still the same, “How the child grows!” And the cosy, indulgent parents petted and scolded her in a breath; and talked proudly and fondly about her when she was away; and repeated her last sayings wonderingly and enjoyingly to each other over the parlour fire, when

she had gone to bed : for they would not spoil her by letting her overhear them. No, no ; they both agreed they mustn't—wouldn't—spoil her. And the sly puss knew all the while every feeling of their hearts—every thought of their minds. And sometimes, as she dwelled on their little innocent self-deceptions about herself, she would burst out into sudden irrepressible laughter ; and, sometimes, a single tear would tremble long—growing bigger and bigger—in those great blue eyes, till it would fall ; and then there would be a look into the faces of the dear old people, that they couldn't all understand, but that nevertheless made them happier than they cared to acknowledge in any other way than by a kindred suffusion over the dull, failing, but still glad eyes. Mr. Dell will never know how he grieved and distressed those simple hearts when he asked their daughter's hand, and owned he had already won her love. They kept to themselves their great trouble. They had known it must come, as one knows in the loveliest weather storms will some day or other break out ; but they hadn't attempted to realise the fact till it came upon and overpowered them. They cried, and comforted each other as they best could when alone ; and they laughed responsively to all Winny's sallies when with her. But she understood : and it was a hard struggle with her before she could make up her mind to marry Mr. Dell, and to leave them. And if he—divining her feelings—had not convinced her that the old people must come and live near them—even if they would not live with them—he would not have gained her consent that the marriage should

be immediate. As the old relations were to be broken up, said he, it was best to do it promptly, that new ones might be established for her and for her parents, calculated to secure their comfort and happiness. Of course they gave their consent to the marriage in exactly the same spirit they had always consented to every serious proposition of hers. They had said to the spoilt pet of five years old, "Winny shan't go to school if she don't like;" they said now, "Winny must have him as her husband if she wishes it."

We have kept "Winny"—Winifred Thorn was the maiden name that she had exchanged for that of Mrs. Bletchworth Dell—a long time, resting her little foot on the fender; but she has been busy all the while studying Meggy—to the latter's great discomfort.

"Cook," said she at last, seriously, "what is the matter with Meggy, that she goes on like this? Surely she can't be well?"

"Lor, Ma'am," exclaimed Cook, crossing her tarts with the paste bars that she had cut out, "not well! You should see her eat and drink, Ma'am. Not well, indeed! No, no; that's everybody's cry, but take my word for it, Ma'am, it's nothing to do with her health. Just look at her! how her clothes is flung on her; look at her gown all awry, and her collar pinned anywheres over her shoulder; and her hairs all across and across, and partin nowheres in partikeler. Look at that for a young gal as is got her looks, I may say, as well as most gals now-a-days; for there's bin a fallin off o' good looks, Ma'am, since my time. Well, see if it isn't true what I'm always a tellin people, that it lays in her head, Ma'am.

She's willin' enough, but her head's always a gettin' the better of her. It goes fast, and don't keep time; it's just like a clock without a pendulum, but with its weights on, a ticking away in them upper works at a fearful rate, and making you want to bring her to a sudden stop, afore she runs herself down so far you'll never get her up agin. I should like to know what doctor, Ma'am, 'll cure that?"

"Well, I don't know, Cook," said Mrs. Dell, repressing a half-laugh, that Cook's descriptions and logic had drawn forth; "but don't you think she's too much in this hot kitchen? My head begins to ache already. What do you feel, Meggy? What makes you behave so strangely?"

Meggy looked shamefaced, and muttered apologetically, as she scraped away at a patty-pan, "It's only them rompings in my head, again, Ma'am; they 'most mazes me sometimes."

Mrs. Dell laughed, showing all her tiny glittering teeth, as she said—

"But tell me, what is that, Meggy? What are the rompings in the head?" Then, with one of her sudden fits of gravity, she drew her hand from her white leathern gauntlet, and bending forward laid it gently on the low coarse forehead. "Do you mean it aches? Oh, yes, it's very hot—burning. I'm sure you would be better if you went out oftener, Meggy. Cook, let her go when she has done this morning. Mind you do, Meggy. It's so nice in the lane leading to the common. I never saw so many flowers in my life as the sun has brought out there this mornung after the storm. Come, make haste." And

the little fairy hand rose lightly from the tangled hair, with the "partin nowheres in partikeler;" and gathering her long skirt about her, Mrs. Dell went out; tapping with her whip, to Cook's annoyance, as she passed along, the paper bags of dry herbs hanging from the ceiling.

Lanes! Flowers! poor Meggy, what had she in common with such things? To be sure she raced through them with Cook every Sunday evening to Yelverton church, when she would very much rather have stayed at home, and have spelled out a chapter of her old Bible in her bed-room. But now the meaning of those words seemed something as strange and as beautiful to Meggy as the voice that breathed them; and as the cool, soft hand, the touch of which had thrilled through her, and quieted—it really almost seemed so—the terrible romplings in the poor, weary, but ever restless brain.

"Well, are you ready?" cried Mr. Dell, coming in at the passage door, with the pups yelping after him.

Winny was standing just outside the kitchen door, in the court-yard, looking down upon two cats—mother and daughter.

"Hush!" said she to him, as he approached; and then, holding up her finger, "Look! Look!"

If Mr. Dell might have had his own way, he would have preferred looking at the speaker herself—the prettiest picture (he thought) that was ever vouchsafed to artist—or, sweeter still, to husband-eyes; but she had made him very obedient already; so he looked at the cats with due gravity and attention.

The old mother had rolled over in her sleep on her

back, and lay with her paws drooping languidly, and nose turned upwards ; while the kitten (disturbed by flies) sat looking down on her parent with a staid, elderly air, just as she had seen her mother gaze at her when she had lain exhausted with running after her tail.

Winnie's little round shoulders shook with suppressed laughter as she watched them, and made Mr. Dell shut the kitchen door to keep in the pups, who were making friends with Mr. Short.

Presently the kitten, in her sleepy dignity, so far forgot herself as to plant her paw on her mother's breast, and begin, demurely, to lick away some imaginary speck. The offended matron turned on her side, and gave the offending paw a gentle bite. The kitten drew back surprised, and held the silly little paw raised from the ground, with a look of grave displeasure. Then following up the maternal part, she stretched the paw out again, and with her head inclined meditatively to one side, gave her mother several sharp taps in quick succession on the ear, which so completely roused her that she started up with an angry moan ; and the kitten, forgetting her dignity, made two or three sideway bounds across the court ; dashed round the sun-dial ; met her mother coming the other way, and then the two went tearing round and round, till the thoughtful matron, reflecting probably that the mad little minx would dash her brains out against the stone pillar, if she didn't mind, stopped, and went back growling to the step ; and there she saw the kitten quiet, and peeping at her in a pretended fright from behind the dial.

"Come, come," said Mr. Dell, laughing heartily at Winny's childlike enjoyment, "Grace is waiting in the lane to see you have your first riding lesson. Mr. Short," he called, looking in at the kitchen door, "will you see the saddle put on the mare, and let George bring her after me?" He then whistled to the pups, who were waiting for the rind of Mr. Short's last bit of cheese; and he and Winny and the pups all crossed the court, and went round toward the lane, followed very quickly by George (the coachman and groom) with the mare. But if anybody cared about the riding lesson, certainly it was not Winny. That lane, with its trees, and flowers, and birds, and delicious and ever-varying wildnesses, perfectly captivated her. It was as evidently impossible for Winny to walk through it like Grace or any other rational being, as it would have been for Grace to have laid her hand on Meggy's head in the manner and with the feeling I have described. Winny had been long ago shamed out of running after butterflies; but still, when one—a rare and superb fellow, it must be owned—started from the hedge beside them, she would stop and gaze, shading her eyes with her hand from the sun, wistfully watching him till he was out of sight. If any stray homely scent, such as that of the southernwood, came across them, reminding her of the little garden at Laurel Cottage, where roses and cabbages might often be found growing together, she must needs find out the stunted bush (some cast-away from a neighbouring garden), and bury her face in it for an instant, and clasp her arms round it, as heartily and fondly as though it were her own buxom

mother, or hale old Thorn himself; and in truth it was of them she thought more than of the flowers that had so vividly recalled them to her heart. It was a perfume of home that then entered into her very soul. Her companions waited, and watched, and said to themselves—Grace impatiently, Mr. Dell delightedly—they never should get her through the lane on to the common, where the lesson was to be given. Every loose wreath of honey-suckle that greedy unkindly hands had loosened from the hedge, as they rifled it of its latest blossoms, and left it trailing across the path, must be lifted up, and twined once more, tenderly, around the supporting boughs. Every hollow tree must be peeped into—oh, they might laugh,—but they didn't know what discoveries she had often made in old tree trunks. And then when they came upon the first convolvulus of the season—one solitary and very early flower—that had just opened in all its white, stainless, fragile beauty, in a little nook of green leaves, she stopped, her hands pressed together palm to palm, and heaved a little sigh of pleasure and admiration before they could get her away.

The oddest part of the business was to see her regardlessness, if not her actual unconsciousness, of the presence of her husband and of Grace; so far, at least, as their presence might be supposed to check or in any way control her self-manifestations. She had evidently been so used to express her pleasure and her pain—just as either emotion might rise—that she would have felt something must be wrong in the frame-work of things if she might not continue to do

so now: and certainly the last thought to enter her mind would be that she was thus exciting either surprise or admiration, or any other particular sentiment in those around her. At that moment, however—if never before—there were two persons, whose eyes and thoughts bent towards her in the deepest study of her character:—one of those persons feeling every instant a kind of fresh sense of the wonderful secret he possessed, and might not whisper of to the world; a secret that raised his whole frame, and kindled strange light in his eyes, and gave a softness to his smile when he spake to the humblest wayfarer; the secret of a happiness too great for the world to understand, and which he could not talk of even to her who had opened such a heaven unto his soul;—the other person measuring, weighing, testing, comparing; asking if this was the being that had destroyed life for her, and,—as she believed,—for him; speculating how long such love might last; what were its conditions, temptations, dangers; and letting the thoughts gloomily stretch on and on, until the vista became too dark, and perplexing, and horrible; and until it was a relief—a sensible relief—to turn suddenly back, and listen once again to the laugh that racked her soul with pain, while her ears confessed the music; and to meet Mr. Dell's eyes, as he glanced towards her, seeking a look of sympathy in answer.

And that look came; though as suddenly and unexpectedly as a beam of light might come from the skies on a dull day. Whatever there might be of effort in its origin was, however, unnoticed—undreamed of by Mr. Dell; and so it gave him a sense of inex-

pressible gladness ; for it said not only that Grace was herself again, but that she and he would be able to resume their old friendship and intellectual relations. In truth, he had had no faith in the reality of Grace's love for him, though he entirely believed in her belief of that love. He was, besides, too deeply pre-occupied to think much about Grace or any one person in the whole world just then, except the little enchantress herself, whom he had snatched away from the cottage of the Thorns. And so, what with the thought on the one hand that did actuate him, and what with the excuse for want of thought on the other, he brought himself to believe that the best way to treat his fair cousin would be to forget, or appear to forget, all the recent incidents as rapidly as he could, by displaying his old and natural frankness toward her. And certainly he was thus far right,—that no course could have been so conducive to the comfort and self-respect of a woman, who really desired to dismiss for ever from her own mind the momentary humiliation to which she had subjected herself, and whose first concern would be to glide as simply, and so to speak, gracefully, as she might, over the narrow strip of time that intervened between the present transition state of feeling and position to that future one, when the old untroubled, uncompromised peace would be regained. He had asked himself how *he* would like to be treated had he been in Grace's position ; and his conduct to her was the cordial honest answer.

“ I do not wonder at your admiration—your love—now,” said Grace, in low, meaning accents. Mr. Dell's reply, after a moment's pause, was to stretch out his

hand to Grace, and to clasp hers; and then to turn away, and try unnoticed to brush off the water-drops that were gathering in his eyes. "But you have a responsibility upon you; she is not strong in body, I fear. God has not given her everything. And then, her education—"

"Ah, yes. I want to talk to you, Grace, about that. Her parents—good old people they are, I assure you; you would like them very much—are retired farmers, never themselves knowing much more than to read and write, and to keep the simple accounts of their farm. And though they have always proposed to give Winny a good education, and have certainly paid for a fair one, they have utterly spoiled her in that respect. She has, it seems, always disliked school, and formal teaching of every kind; though, as you perceive, she has been a tolerably attentive student in the open-air school of Nature; and has developed to no slight extent, in her desultory way, whatever was most true, or beautiful, or energetic, in her instincts."

"You won't be hurt or offended if I tell you the truth in this matter?"

"My dear Grace! Let me say at once, I thought much of her educational deficiencies before marriage; much more than I do now. Indeed, I believed them then to be more serious than I do now. Acting, therefore, with my eyes open, should I not be a poor creature if I could be hurt in any way to hear the truth from a friend; or should I feel unprepared quietly to do whatever may be requisite to make my wife appear to the world what she really is?" Grace

did not need any addition to the sentence, to tell her in what sort of estimation Mr. Dell held his wife; his tone and manner were sufficiently eloquent. "Yes," he continued, after a pause, "I know what you would say; you have noticed her want of knowledge in matters of history, science, and general literature; and her simplicity in utterly ignoring her ignorance."

Grace nodded, with a smile.

"And you dread for me—"

"And for herself."

"True, I thank you; and for herself—the awkwardness, the gossip, the scandal, the sneer, the malicious laugh. Well, I thought of all that, and I said to myself, 'A little time, and some loving help, will soon set her right; and meanwhile let me never forget that she does not know her deficiency: I do. It is I, therefore, who should suffer, not she.' And that, my dear cousin, is what I want to say to you now. Help me, if you can, and I will be grateful. Let us get over this little difficulty; and meantime let us shield her from feeling, if possible, for one moment, the pain she might so easily be made to suffer. She will see the truth herself but too soon; the instant, in fact, that she attains the first important point of advance; and then she will look back startled, timorous, perhaps unhappy, if she does not see around her on all sides warm, loving, respectful, appreciative friends, as well as something more than all that in her husband."

"Well, cousin, rely upon me. And I thank you for speaking thus plainly." There was little or nothing in Grace's words, but there was everything in the manner in which they were said. Mr. Dell's

previous troubles about Grace disappeared from that moment, and were soon, in effect, forgotten.

Could he have looked into the breast that now received, and appeared to welcome so freely his most secret thoughts, he would have paused in alarm, and have walked away, a wiser, if a sadder, man.

"And how," asked the voice, with its music more mechanical than ever (but still it was music, and very pleasant to listen to), "how will you proceed?"

"Why, almost without seeming to proceed at all; and yet there must be no beating about the bush; she'd understand all that, and scatter us and our plots to confusion in an instant." And he laughed, enjoyingly. "No I shall say just this to her: she doesn't know as much as she ought to know—who does? and she must become a bit of a student. While I study art, she must attain more general knowledge. And then as to the mode: there's Mrs. Cairn, who teaches at the Sunday-school, a lady born, and well educated, and who is at once very poor, and very proud. Her son is educating for the ministry in Scotland. She could in a quiet way find out all the gaps in Winny's attainments, and fill them up very respectably. Perhaps, too, we might arrange, by and by, for her to attack some foreign language, for at present she knows only her own."

"And, if I understand you rightly, you would like *me* to make these little arrangements, in a quiet, unostentatious manner?"

"Exactly: so that it shan't be said in the village—'Mr. Dell's wife is going to school;' and yet, that it shan't be supposed that the very truth it concerns us

all to realise—that life is nothing but an ever-open school—is one that we are ashamed of, when it comes to our own practice. A little tact, Grace, in these matters, makes often the entire difference between a man's winning the respect, or the derision, of his neighbours. And for my wife's sake I am, I own it, very sensitive."

"I will talk with Mrs. Cairn directly, and try to let you see by my success how fully I understand and reciprocate your wishes. But where is Winny all this time?" They had, strange to say, forgotten her;—the person about whom alone their whole souls had been occupied. A bird was at that moment pouring forth a gush of such fresh, exquisite melody, that both listened to it, even while gazing back into the coverts of the lane, to get a glimpse of the wanderer. They could not see her. At last the bird ceased. There was a pause, that seemed to extend through all nature, and suggest how wide an area had been hushed for the moment by the song. The bird did not sing again; and so Winny, who had been rapt, her soul far away, up into the skies with the bird—nay, further still, up right into the heaven beyond,—came back again with a sigh to earth, and thought of her companions, and started forth to seek them.

Mr. Dell advanced to meet her; and holding up Winny's riding-whip, which he had taken from her and now carried in his hand, he appeared to threaten her with punishment, while he demanded what had kept her so long. She paused a moment; then, with an air of mock gravity and deprecation, she said, half speaking and half singing:

“ I heard a little linnet sing,
Sweet—sweet the note and strong ;
She caught the dying words of Spring,
And poured them forth in song.”

“ Winny, I wish you would tell me where you get these snatches of old song, as you call them.”

There was just a faint rosy hue perceptible in Winny’s cheek as she answered, “ Oh, I read, and read, and forget all about the particular books afterward. And I used to hear many little bits sung by the country women, in their cottages, when I roamed about round Fallon, in search of adventures. And as to the tunes—ah, you may laugh ! but I really think I got as many from the birds as anywhere.”

Mr. Dell shook his head ; and then the little feet gave a petulant kick at the skirts of the riding habit to get them out of the way, and then they stamped with a show of indignation, while Mr. Dell was asked “ Do you mean, sir, to doubt my word ? ”

Well, to own the truth, Mr. Dell had very grave doubts about that word, sweet as it was, and sufficient as it might be for him to stand by and do battle for to the death, in the spirit of an old knight-errant. He had managed to form a theory of his own by putting together minute little facts that he had silently observed. He believed, then, that these song snatches were her own. She would hear some exquisite line of poetry, perhaps, or some delicious chord in music, and it would haunt her, till she found some wandering fancy or feeling that harmonised with it, and that she could put into simple but expressive words : not imitating the original, her nature was too individual for that, but

resting on, working from it. And generally it was the sound, the melody—the tone, the feeling, she cared for, rather than any precise sense or object.”

“But, Winny, why do you so constantly dwell on the spring?”

“You an artist, and ask that? Isn’t everything in this world that is most beautiful a kind of spring? every fresh song that a bird sings? every new flower that a plant puts forth? every bit of scent in a plant’s breath? Smell this sprig of sweet-briar, if your soul is dull just now, and can’t understand my wise words without!” She paused, holding up the sprig of briar for him to smell to, and looking long and yearningly in his face. Then she said, very softly, “Our love, is not that too, like them, all spring? I don’t want summer. Ah! I have sometimes fancied I shouldn’t live to know anything more than my life’s spring.”

Was it the gathering gloom in the sky that caused such a deep shade to pass over the face of the husband as he listened? There was a great roaring of winds far up in the sky, though felt below only in a slight puff on the face, and in a gentle lift of the hair; was it this which seemed to open to Mr. Dell, for an instant, a wild and stormy future, but which disappeared as rapidly as it came? These drops of rain that begin to fall, is there some secret sympathy betwixt them and the moisture that appears in Mr. Dell’s eyes, and then (as Winny watches him) in hers? Suddenly he calls out—

“Quick, Winny, home! A shower threatens. Run on fast! I will warn Grace, and send home the

mare, and soon be after you. Nay, go! Never mind the dogs."

She obeyed him, tucking up her riding-dress in prompt fashion, and making a hood of the skirts; and then, looking at Mr. Dell for a moment from within the cosy cell she had erected,—first with a smile, then with a ringing laugh, she turned; and scudded along with a speed and gracefulness that no fashionable lady could have ventured even to attempt, though she would have certainly envied the power.

"O dear," exclaimed Winny, as she stood in the old porch a few minutes later, divested of her riding-habit, and watching with Grace and Mr. Dell (who were afraid of her running off again) a splendid rainbow, that grew by degrees fainter and fainter in the dull sky; "O dear, the weather's like a spoilt child to-day, that somebody keeps coaxing to be good before it has had its cry out!" Just then Nero set up such a terrific barking that Winny started.

"O," said Mr. Dell, laughing, "it's only the post-man; Nero has a mortal dislike to the man. I suspect our lame Mercury has been startled by the dog on some occasion, and has revenged himself by a stone or a kick. If not, Nero must think he has evil intentions towards us, concealed in that leathern bag of his." Then they all went into the sitting room, to wait the appearance of Rebecca with the Bletchworth Hall post-bag.

CHAPTER VI.

JEAN'S LETTER.

MRS. DELL knocked softly with the back of her hand at Jean's door. There was a step across the room, a quick turn of the handle, and Winny was obliged to shade her eyes from the sudden glare of light that streamed out into the dark corridor as the door was opened, and Jean stood there.

It was a small square room, every corner of which was bared to the strong light let in by the great blindless window. Like Jean herself, it was scrupulously clean and precise, nothing more; and, unlike almost all the other rooms in Bletchworth Hall, it contained little or no old furniture. Jean did not like what she termed lumber; and preferred the room to be as Mrs. Dell now beheld it, almost bare of comfort. A narrow iron bedstead, with a narrow strip of carpet on the white boards beside it; two rush-bottomed chairs; a wooden table, covered with white linen, on which stood Jean's work-box and Bible; a wash-hand stand; and a common square looking-glass, hung in a bad light, as though it were little used, and less cared for; these were nearly all the articles of furniture it contained. You took in the whole at a glance; and saw there was nothing for the eye to rest upon as peculiar, unless it were the

small oval picture over the mantel-piece, with its face turned to the wall, and its frame thick with dust.

Such was Jean's room, and it told her story—that room of hers. For, like the picture, was the one mystery of her heart turned from the world's gaze; and all else of Jean was left passionless and bare, numbed to pleasure, and almost to pain.

"A letter for you, Jean," said Mrs. Dell, holding it out. Mrs. Dell had not yet, in her new life, got over the great interest she had always been accustomed to attach to the postman's visit; and that which she felt for herself she presumed for others. So she had hurried to Jean with the letter she had found among Mr. Dell's in the little leathern bag.

"For me! I thank you, Ma'am;" and Jean's eyes ran hurriedly along the address, as she took it from her mistress, and closed the door again as the latter went away.

A something in those cold grey eyes as they fell on the letter, sunk into Winny's heart; and she walked slowly along the passage, wondering about Jean, and her room, and her letter. But presently she felt one of the pups pulling at the handkerchief with which she had been teasing him in the garden; so she held it up, and shook it, and worked him into a great ecstasy of rage, and into all sorts of frenzied leaps, and head-over-heels tumbles; and then Winny hung the handkerchief on a nail above his reach on Mrs. Addersley's door, which now attracted her eye in passing. That done, she slipped down two or three stairs, and stood watching and listening in a state of suppressed but wicked enjoyment to Mrs. Addersley's

whining "Come in!" which grew more and more petulant at each jump the dog made at the door.

Jean looked long at the letter, sitting stiffly on the edge of one of the rush-bottomed chairs; and the strong afternoon sun blazed in upon her, and for once in her life Jean longed for a dark corner just to open the letter in; she would not have minded coming out again into the light to read it. Suddenly she looked up from it to the picture over the mantel-piece; some strong impulse seized her, she got up, turned the key in the door, and almost before she had drawn three breaths (with one hand pressed tightly to her side) she had stretched up the other to the wall, and taken down the picture from the rusty nail, propped it against her work-box on the table, and sat down again, as stiffly upright as before, on the chair in front of it, with the letter in her hand, looking from one to the other.

The picture was a little half-finished water-colour painting by Mr. Dell; and had, like many another of that gentleman's productions, been torn from its frame in some mood of dissatisfaction, thrust into the basket under the studio table, and sent away with the waste paper, to be wondered at by Meggy, or to light Cook's fire. How this came to be saved from the general doom, and set in that black frame, only Jean herself could tell. It showed the head of a very young man. The fine, blue, straightforward-looking eyes, had more in them of frankness and courage than of thought; yet the face, as a whole, did not give one the idea of a strong face, perhaps from an indescribable something of uncertainty and indefiniteness about the close of the lips.

A strange pain shot through Jean as she looked ; and she asked herself bitterly why she had touched the picture just now. And then her eye fell on the letter, and with a wild beating at her heart that she thought never again to have experienced she tore it open. Even then before looking at it she drew her hand across her eyes, as for a moment's reflection, and wondered how it would begin. And then she read—"Dear, dear Jean ;" and after that the words seemed to swim and flow into one another, and her brain grew dizzy in the hopeless effort to disentangle them. Perhaps some dust from the picture had got into her eyes. She took up the corner of her apron and rubbed them. Ay, a little dust, Jean, that is all. Did you think that the picture which you have just taken down in your heart, and looked at once again as of old, could hang there through a long and weary time, and nothing gather about it ? So Jean rubbed her eyes, and, at last, read the letter through without a single stop :

"Chatham, July 15, 185—.

"DEAR, DEAR JEAN,

"I know what you and mother must think of me, and I deserve your worst thoughts. But let this explain why you have not heard from me since I left Scotland. After the affair at St. Andrew's, which I suppose soon reached Yelverton, I was so utterly sick of my life,—what with that trouble and exposure, what with the knowledge that my mother's hard-saved little fortune had disappeared in the attempt to make a gentleman of me, before, alas ! I had learned to be a man,—that I enlisted, in a mad fit, into the

army. It was when the Crimean war seemed to open a new chance for men like myself to rise from the ranks ; and, for the moment, I deluded myself with the idea, that I would in a new career yet re-establish my position with you all at home, and realise some of the kindly dreams with which my future had been invested. Oh, Jean ! I could kill myself as I think of my own folly. I am enduring a life of such misery, such grinding humiliation, as you would shudder to see a dog endure. I have found an enemy, who poisons my life. He makes my companions hate me, for what they are pleased to think airs of superiority ; and my superior officers treat me with contempt, as a man insolently ambitious, and who must be kept down. To keep me down they tread upon me. And I turn ; I cannot help it. But my position grows more and more perilous each day. Is there any possibility of procuring my discharge ? I write to you, because I do not know—and dread to ask—what mother's present means are. I leave it to you, Jean. If you see any good in telling her, go at once, and break it to her in your own way. If not—well then, God help me, for I will break from my position somehow, before long. I have that to answer for to-morrow that will probably decide me. I hope you will be able to understand what I have written, which I intended to write very calmly, but I could not.

“ Ever sincerely yours,

“ ARCHIBALD CAIRN.

“ P.S. Address to the ‘ Jolly Soldier,’ Chatham.”

And Jean folded the letter, and stood, sliding it up and down between her fingers, trying vaguely to remember how she felt before she got past those opening words—"Dear, dear Jean;" for she was herself again now, ready for action, and could scarcely realise the fact that she had taken down the picture. But there it was. So she hung it up, with the face to the wall as before, without a quiver of the arm; and the marks of her fingers on the dust of the frame, and the round blistering drop on the letter, were the only visible traces of all that had passed in Jean's heart during the last few minutes. She pinned on her bonnet and shawl at the little glass, knelt down and unlocked a hair-trunk, from which she drew a purse of wash-leather, counted its contents with an anxious look, then tied it round, and put it in her pocket. Again locking the trunk, she left the room.

She walked with quick steps along the passage, and without looking up, paused, and tapped at Miss Addersley's door.

"Come in, Jean," said Grace; so Jean opened the door, and as she did so a deep rich red stained the polished boards, and a kind of Indian perfume pervaded the passage some minutes after it was closed again. Facing the door was the great window opening to the black cedars, and towards Grey Ghost Walk beyond. The light that entered that way was but of a gloomy, sunless kind. But through the window, and its curtain of "wine-dark violet" silk, at the far end of the room, the sun shone brilliantly; and so made the peculiar rich suffusion that tinged everything in the place.

Grace was dressing with more than usual care that afternoon for the small tea-party of country neighbours that Mr. Dell had invited—quiet, cosy people—by way of preparing his wife for the more formal reception that was to take place in a few days. Her black velvet robe lay on a chair beside her. She was attired in a wrapper of Indian muslin of a pale primrose colour. Before her was the tall glass, by means of which, in Jean's absence, she went on plaiting her hair, and glancing now and then for a moment at the "Times" that lay on a table by her side. She had for months past made it a habit to study the "Times," and it was no wonder, therefore, that when Mr. Dell happened to speak on politics he always found her, for a woman, unusually well informed.

"Why, Jean," said she, as the spare figure appeared like a shadow in the corner of the mirror, and thus for the first time made its presence known, "dressed at this time, and going out! Have you forgotten me?"

"I beg your pardon," began Jean, hurriedly, "but I have just received a letter, and I came to ask you to spare me to-day to go to Mrs. Cairn's."

"Mrs. Cairn's! oh, certainly, certainly. But what is the matter?"

"Her son"—said Jean, while playing nervously with the scanty fringe of her shawl, and trying to shape out words that she could utter—"has written to me, and—"

"Really!" said Grace, turning and looking full at Jean. "So you have heard from him at last. Dear Mrs. Cairn! I am so glad. And he has written to

you, Jean; how odd! Oh, by the bye, I remember; not so very strange either, is it, Jean?"

"Mr. Archibald has written to me," continued Jean in a dry voice—one in which Grace thought she could perceive some bitterness—"instead of to his mother, because he is in trouble, and would not pain her, if she cannot help him."

Grace laid down her brush softly, and resting her chin on the back of her hand, remained sunk in deep thought, repeating absently, "Well, Jean?"

Jean hesitated a moment, then drew the letter from her pocket and placed it before Grace. Of the two evils it seemed the least: better at any rate than to stand there, and be cross-questioned on matters which it would be unendurable pain to answer.

Grace read the letter through twice; and instead of rousing her from the reverie she had fallen into, it seemed to become a part of it. "Dear me," she said at last, handing it back to Jean, "how unfortunate! How very sad! But tell me, what does he mean by the affair at the University, Jean?"

It might have been the light, but Grace fancied she saw a faint flush overspread Jean's face, as she answered quickly:

"Oh it's nothing now. It wasn't so bad at the time as he thinks. We—I mean Mrs. Cairn, would have known nothing about it if a friend of hers from Scotland had not told her."

Grace, who had a peculiarly happy way of making much of a little thing, or of making light of a great one, as it might suit her mood and purpose, said in a pressing but seemingly careless tone—

“But tell me—was it some love affair, or not?”

“Yes, something of that sort,” said Jean, manoeuvring to get from the side of the glass, in which she had just caught a glimpse of Grace’s eye fixed on her. “I think it was with some woman who hadn’t a very good name in the place, and Archy didn’t know it; and it brought on a deal of talk and scandal against him before he discovered her true character. But it’s all ended long ago. And it wasn’t so bad as he thinks: nobody knew of it here but us.”

For a few seconds Grace remained leaning back in her chair, absorbed in thought. Presently she said to Jean, who stood nervous and anxious to escape—

“And what will he do when he comes back?”

“Mr. Archy is a great scholar. He can do anything.”

“Yes,” said Grace smiling, “that’s very likely. But great scholars are at a stand-still sometimes. I remember about him now. Your master used, I think, to be very fond of him, before I came here; and had a notion he was very clever and promising. Well, Jean, I have a thought: but before I tell it to you, I must let you into a secret. Mrs. Dell wishes to take some lessons, and I and my cousin have spoken about Mrs. Cairn. I have a very good opinion of her. Let her know that quietly; and that I want to see her about Mrs. Dell. Something may grow out of it for her. Possibly for her son also. Mrs. Dell may wish to learn more than Mrs. Cairn can teach her—a language perhaps. You understand?”

“Oh yes, ma’am,” said Jean, and so gratefully! If Grace had showered down all sorts of blessings

upon herself, she could scarcely have gone so direct to Jean's heart as by these words. But if this was the first impulse of her feelings, it was very different with her thoughts, when she pictured him to herself as at home once more—seeing her daily—old tones, old times revived—yet wanting all that they had originally promised her. Yes, her thoughts were perplexing—on the whole, sad; but when she came to disentangle them as was her wont, and perceive what she ought to do, the path seemed clear enough, and the beginning was only what she had grown accustomed to—the treading down those that related to her own heart—down—down relentlessly—under her feet.

“Then, I suppose,” continued Grace, “Mrs. Cairn will set off at once to Chatham. Poor old lady, it's a long journey for her to undertake alone. Why don't you go with her? You can if you like.”

“Thank you; I will see. Yes, I think I had better go with her, perhaps;” though Jean's heart misgave her at the thought of such a journey, and a meeting that might expose her to such misconception.

Again the red light flushed the passage floor, and again the Indian perfume, unnoticed within, filled its atmosphere, as Jean's footsteps died away on the stairs.

Long after she had gone, Grace remained in her seat before the glass, musing. Once she drew back the hair suddenly from her brow, and bent forward as though grappling with some hostile thought, or perhaps with some more human enemy. And then the sight of her face—undoubtedly a handsome one—

caught her own eyes, and was looked at inquiringly by them, as though face and eyes were strangers to each other till now, and as though the new acquaintance were not altogether displeasing. And there was, at times, a pale smile of triumph, just seen growing up, but checked as premature, out of place, by the strong intelligent will ; a smile that reminded one of the moonbeams in Grey Ghost Walk. It just played about her colourless face, and died. And thus she sat, till the red light went out of the room, and the rooks began to gather clamorously in the chesnut avenue ; and then, with one more faint revival of the meaning smile scarcely rising higher than the thin lips, she rose and finished dressing.

CHAPTER VII.

THE QUARTER-MASTER'S WIDOW.

AS Jean was crossing the kitchen in her swift, noiseless manner, looking, as she always did look, straight before her, and at nothing and no one by the way, she felt a hand laid on her arm; she turned,—a pair of blue eyes looked into her own troubled ones, and a sweet voice said—

“Jean, if you're going into the village, I wish you would take Meggy with you as far as the lane. You can leave her there till you come back.”

Had Cook, or indeed any other person, asked this, just now, Jean would most likely have refused impatiently, and passed on. As it was, however, with those eyes looking into hers, and that hand upon her arm, she smiled faintly, and looked back for Meggy, who stood bonneted, flushed and proud as a newly-blown pæony, and with a broad grin on her face that scarcely left her eyes perceptible. And so, before Jean recollected that she was probably not coming back that night, she found herself in the lane with her charge.

The two walked along pretty quickly. Jean, with her lips moving now and then, as though in imaginary conversation, and her grey eyes fixed on the ground

before her, had no thought or remembrance of Meggy; who, on her part, saw little difference in the lane, week day or Sunday; indeed, what with the discomfort of a bonnet, and the creak of her Sunday shoes, she felt at first very much as though she were being cheated into an extra visit to church. But when they got out into the common, and began to breast the strong breeze, that blew her bonnet off, she seemed to imbibe new life; and to be seized with an instinctive desire, behind Jean's back, to use her limbs in all sorts of odd ways; and altogether to behave like one of the hard-working donkeys that were turned out on the common on Sundays, for a day of liberty and refreshment. But Jean's presence, and swift step, kept her under some restraint. Now she would leave the foot-path, and crushing hundreds of tiny delicate turf flowers beneath her clumsy feet, pluck a great glowing dandelion, which after sniffing at rapturously for the next few yards, she would thrust shyly in Jean's face; and Jean, without pausing in her walk, and without a trace of emotion of any kind, would raise her hand, and put Meggy's offering away, as she would put away one of the tiresome gnats which were beginning to swarm about them in the soft light. It was not until they had left all the furze behind, and were on the bleak barren side of the common, that Jean thought of Meggy at all; and then she remembered that it would not be convenient to take her further. So, turning round, she said abruptly—

“You had better go back now. Good bye;” and then, drawing her shawl round her, she walked on

more swiftly than before. Meggy, after scratching her arms and hands with trying to pick a solitary spray of blossom that here and there remained on the furze, followed a foot-path which she thought must lead her homewards, and was soon out of sight.

Jean paused a moment before a double row of tenements on the border of the common, considering whether she should go round them to reach the low-fenced cottage that stood by itself, behind the three poplars, or whether she should go through them as the nearest way, which she did not care to do generally. She had always been looked upon with suspicion by the villagers. This was partly on account of her plain, almost mean, dress, so out of character with the position she held at the Hall, where she had been for many years, under the Bletchworth dynasty, a trusty servant; and then, when the Dells succeeded, a kind of mistress, until the appearance of Miss Addersley at the Hall; who found in Jean a treasure, and had good sense enough practically to acknowledge it, not by liberal wages only, but by friendly and seemingly confidential treatment. Yes, Jean’s “stinginess” was one cause of the villagers’ dislike. Another was her reserve. She held herself aloof from all intercourse with them; the only exception being Mrs. Cairn, the schoolmistress—the “poor lady.” She “was the only person good enough for Jean to visit,” they supposed. Until lately, this kind of talk had not much troubled Jean; it may be doubted, indeed, whether she had been conscious of it, till the occurrence of an incident at the church two or three Sundays back, led to remarks upon her as she was

passing through the village, which sent the blood rushing hotly into her pale face, and the remembrance of which now arrested her steps.

It was after service one morning, when a subscription was being raised for a poor old woman, whose cottage had been burnt to the ground. Such charities are not unusual in the district to which my story relates. The old woman stood at the church-door, leaning on her crutch, watching the coins being dropped into the little box opposite, and noisily blessing the givers. Every one of the Hall servants as they passed dropped a piece of silver into the box, except Jean; who, in her transit across the old woman's vision, clutched nervously the Prayer Book in her hand, and heeding neither the many eyes that were fixed upon her, nor the example that had been given, slid quickly past; but not so quickly but she was compelled to overhear some of the gossiping comments made upon her meanness.

It would not, however, have been in accordance with Jean's character to let such an incident prey upon her mind at any time, and least of all now. So it was but for a brief moment that her irresolution lasted; and then, raising her head almost proudly, and with a sort of dignity of mien, she entered the narrow court between the rows of cottages. She only felt a slight tingling of the ears, as she became conscious of—though she would not see—the contemptuous eyes that glared at her out of dirty broken windows, or from under low doorways. She drew a long breath of relief as she found the soft yielding grass of the common once more beneath her feet. She had felt

relieved that the children were not in the court when she passed through it. There was something horrible in their dislike. And now, as she laid her hand on Mrs. Cairn’s garden gate, she felt impatient at the sound of their voices within, and heartily longed for school to be over. She thought she would wait outside until they were dismissed. She loosened her bonnet strings, and leaned against the great apple tree, looking down a tiny over-arching avenue of scarlet-runners, and listening with a delicious feeling of rest, after her wearisome walk, to the rustling of the boughs that fanned her heated face. The thatch of the cottage was old and out of order, but its edges were neatly cut; and in the garden all round the cottage nothing was neglected that it was in the power of a woman’s careful mind, but not very strong hand to do. But Jean soon began to weary of inaction. She had work to achieve, she felt. The sweet smell of the flower-leaves of roses, freshly strewn about by the last night’s rain, and the tender, happy carolling of the birds, that her presence disturbed not in the branches above, could not long soothe Jean’s busy mind; so she hurriedly put her hand on the latch, opened the door, and then stood on the threshold, dinned for an instant by the hum and buzz of the many small voices.

The schoolmistress, Mrs. Cairn, sat near the window on a high-backed chair, talking sternly to a child before her. Her brows were slightly contracted, and her face had that worn, harassed look, that always settled upon it towards the close of each afternoon. But her penetrating, unflinching brown eye was as

bright, and her figure as straight and erect as any girl's in the village. She wore a black silk dress, which had been rich and luxuriant once, but had become dull and pinched under the grasp of poverty. A high-crowned and snow-white cap concealed every bit of her silver hair; and above the broad frill which fell over her forehead was a band of black velvet.

Jean stood looking at her; and, anxious as she was for the children to go, yet when she saw them waiting with their bonnets on for the order to depart, her heart throbbed faster to feel her trial so near; for it was a trial to bring such unexpected and afflicting news to one with whom that heart was accustomed to be so open, and yet with whom it needed to be so guarded.

But while she stands, fixing her troubled gaze upon the mistress, whose stern face still bends over the child, Jean hears a word—a murmur—that makes her very eyes seem no longer to look, but to listen—unwillingly, yet irresistibly; while the thin face droops, and the folded hands clutch each other tightly in the coarse thread gloves, as though to check their impulse to rise and shut out the feared yet uncertain sound before it should cease to be uncertain, and the meaning should enter and sting the unguarded, and, for the moment, timorous soul. “Miser!” Was that the word? she asked herself! The light in the straight-staring eyes became wilder and wilder. Was that the word that ran hissing about the room, or was it only in fancy that she had heard it? If she were to turn suddenly round upon a knot of girls behind her, most likely she would find them occupied among themselves, perhaps quarrelling about some childish affair

of their own, which had given rise to the epithet. She *did* turn unexpectedly upon them, and felt a hand let go her shawl, and saw bold eyes shrink before her own searching gaze. And there was a something in Jean's face that would have made older assailants shrink too. But just then she was thinking of another even more than herself;—of what Mrs. Cairn would say or do if she heard the word. Jean turned; yes, Mrs. Cairn *had* heard;—had seen Jean—had risen, and was going to speak to the children. Jean stepped hurriedly to her, between the forms, and whispered—

“Don't say anything, Mrs. Cairn, please don't!”

Mrs. Cairn drew her hand across her aching brow, and then said with her usual stern voice—

“Children, you can go.” And, standing with her hand resting on the chair, she watched them all out, and shut the door; then she dropped into the seat, leaned her elbow on the arm, and her brow upon the hand, repeating in a low voice, “This must not be, Jean. This must not be.”

“Don't think about it, Mrs. Cairn. They must have something to say of everybody.” Mrs. Cairn did not answer; but got up, and busied herself about the room, putting it to rights, as Jean went on—

“You have had another trying day of it. I can't think how you can bear with children this hot weather.”

“Yes, yes,” Mrs. Cairn replied; “it has been a trying afternoon altogether. I get along pretty well all the week—when pay day is over; but it's hard work when it comes to that. Look at those two-

pences." Jean looked; they were ranged along the mantel-piece. "There they are, all of them; but you wouldn't believe the work I had to get them. Perhaps I'm too hard upon those who I know can pay, and won't without plain speaking. I think I am sometimes. But where I know the little things have had to ask and ask for it from parents who can scarcely at times give them food, the money seems to scorch my hand, Jean;—it seems to scorch my hand! Aye, that's right, put out the things, girl; let us have some tea."

Jean set the tea out on a little table in the inner room, which was only a kind of back kitchen, and had a stone floor; but it had a pretty window, with a canary flower climbing all round it, and so made a pleasant change from the hot dusty school-room. And the two pale, jaded women sat gazing into the fire, which seemed not altogether unseasonable to their wintry hearts; and listening to the cheery singing of the kettle on the hob. They were so still and silent that a sparrow pecking at the fallen fruit beneath the currant bushes, just outside the open door, came and sharpened its beak upon the stone at the threshold more than once, before a sound from within drove it away.

"Jean," said Mrs. Cairn, at last, calling the listener's thoughts back from a long wandering journey to the business in hand, and to the letter that must be delivered; "Jean, this must not go on. You put yourself and me into a painfully false position by this strange secrecy. Why is it you stoop to let your actions and your character be so falsified by this

gossip-scandal? Why should they not know the cause that you thus stint yourself in all sorts of ways—that it is for me ; and that if I submit to be so helped, it is because we share our weal and woe together, not only as countrywomen and friends, but as mother and daughter, both alike looking forward to the day when he shall come, to repay us for all the sacrifices we have made ? ”

Jean took up a bunch of dripping watercresses, and went to the door with them, apparently to shake off the superabundant moisture, and for a moment a wan, bitter, bitter smile quivered on the thin lips. She was paler when she sat down again, but perfectly collected ; and even ventured to answer the kindly look of Mrs. Cairn, who now took her hand, as she continued—

“ I know you can’t have the trust in him, my child, that I have. But surely you have enough, Jean, to stop these gossips’ mouths by telling them the truth. Of course,” she added, a little proudly, dropping her hand, “ I know you could not do this by halves ; you could not tell them that I have shared your earnings without letting them know of your engagement, long ago, with Archy. Why do you turn away, Jean ? Come, tell me ; is this the secret—do you doubt his love for you ? ”

“ It isn’t that,” said Jean, evading Mrs. Cairn’s searching eye, and feeling, that quiet as were the tones, there was danger lurking behind them ; and that if she told all she did feel and think, Mrs. Cairn would starve before Jean’s own eyes before she would any longer consent to be helped—as she had

been helped already. There had been long struggles on this matter, even as it was. But if the sole support to Mrs. Cairn's pride and self-respect failed her—the belief that in sacrificing her all for Archy she was indirectly benefiting Jean, as his future wife, and might therefore take, nay, could not practically refuse, the aid that was always so humbly proffered, and so indispensable—Jean knew well that if this belief failed, all her power and influence were at an end, so far as they might be necessary to Mrs. Cairn's pecuniary welfare. "It isn't that," she repeated, "only, you see he has been a long time now, and we have heard nothing of him; and it seems strange, everybody says so, that he has never written; and sometimes I think—suppose—suppose—while we are talking such grand things of him, he should be—"

"Be? Well, be what? What do you mean, Jean?"

"Suppose he should be in trouble!" Jean's voice was husky, and her hand closed nervously on the letter in her pocket.

"Jean, Jean! you've come to tell me something. They've heard something at the Hall. Speak! What is it? What have you heard about my boy?"

They had both risen, and Mrs. Cairn had grasped Jean's right arm, so that she could not get at the letter. They felt each other tremble, with the consciousness of that which had to be told and listened to. The tears gathered in Jean's eye, as she said—

"It is not so very bad; nothing but what we can remedy. He has written to me. Let me show you the letter."

Jean gave the mother the letter, and watched her as she read it. The face, which had lost all its calmness in the rush of motherly feeling and alarm, grew rigid, and the lips compressed, as Mrs. Cairn, at the close, crushed the letter up in her hand, which she almost dashed upon the table, as she exclaimed—

“Archibald Cairn, my husband—I thank God you never lived to see your name disgraced as it is in this letter.”

“No, no, Mrs. Cairn, not disgraced!” interrupted Jean passionately, burning with a sense of injustice done to him,—injustice which she had expected, was prepared for, and determined to contend with; injustice towards him who had embittered her whole life. Yet even while she did this she dreaded the mother’s anger.

“Not disgraced!” repeated Mrs. Cairn, turning upon her. “Not disgraced by entering on such a life, in such a manner, lightly, wholly unprepared, as a mere matter of convenience, as a cowardly way of getting out of a scrape into which no doubt he has shamefully fallen! Not disgraced! With his mind, views, and ability, to go forth to kill or be killed—with as little care or sense of responsibility as if he were one of a band of idle sportsmen, or as a man having no ties among his fellow-creatures—no duties toward God. Is this what he learned under our roof? Is this the fruit of all his father’s teaching? Not disgraced! Tell me, has he not now made himself into one of those whom his father held in such contempt and abhorrence—men who sell their sword for hire, and in so doing sell their souls with it? My

husband, Jean, was a soldier. He fought against his country's enemies—no man more bravely, or, within his sphere, more successfully; but he did it with a clear conscience. Rightly or wrongly, he believed it was his vocation. He gloried in it, and I—his wife—dare to say it, he helped to glorify it. He was, at once, soldier of his king, and of the King of Kings. Not disgraced! Oh, Jean, do you feel so little with me? You who were to have been my daughter! He becomes a soldier, does he? and before he has found time to let us know the fact he discovers it is not to his liking, and I must purchase his discharge? Well, he shall be answered. He shall be satisfied—quite satisfied. I will tell him now, what hitherto I have striven to conceal,—that to give him the means of realising his boyish dreams—dreams that now as a man he renounces—I have parted with my last shilling, and have lived upon your bounty.”

“Oh, Mrs. Cairn!”

“Stay, yes,—I forgot for a moment—there is one thing more. This roof is mine—I can sell that, and become houseless. And should I not do so for so noble—*noble* a son?”

“Oh, Mrs. Cairn!” was all Jean could say, as she listened to these bitter cruel words; which yet she felt to be more just than she was willing to acknowledge.

“No—no, Jean! he is mistaken! Purchase his discharge! No—no—no; let him not believe it. I will not do him or ourselves so poor a service. As he has made his bed, so let him lie. Go away, Jean, a little while; we will talk again. Oh, my poor—poor

child! Is this the hope I have been holding out to you. Nay, leave me alone."

"No, Mrs. Cairn, I must say this: if Archy isn't prosperous, if he is in trouble and misery, and then appeals to us, I can't harden my heart to him as you do, just because we've talked great things that were not to be, and can't stoop to accept the little things that God pleases to give us. I cannot do that, Mrs. Cairn—I will not." This was said almost defiantly; but Jean's mood instantly changed. She came to the table, placed her hand on Mrs. Cairn's that lay there—clenched, and looking up with streaming eyes into the stern face, she said, "We must go to him at once. We must go, and save him from what might be real disgrace."

"What do you mean?" asked the mother, throwing off Jean's hand, and spreading out the crumpled letter before her, to look at it again.

"Didn't you see that?" inquired Jean, pointing with trembling finger to the passage in Archy's letter that said—"I have that to answer for to-morrow which will probably decide me." "We must go to him,—we must save him," she repeated. But Mrs. Cairn stood, darkly silent, making no sign of acquiescence.

"Jean," said she at last, in a changed and painfully unnatural voice, as she walked into the next room, "come here." When Jean came to her side, she held her by the wrist, and said, as she pointed up to the quarter-master's sword slung in leather bands over the mantel-piece, "You know that that was his father's sword, Jean; and look here." She took from

a drawer a little parcel carefully folded in a handkerchief, and opening it, showed Jean a worn old spelling-book. She then turned over the tattered yellow leaves, speaking the while, with the same slow, measured, and painful utterance. "He learned his letters from this. One day he was sitting on my knee; I had been hearing him read, and he was talking to me about what he had been reading. I don't remember his words, but I almost held my breath to hear a child of four years old say the things he did. His father came in, and pointed that sword at him in play, and Archy screamed and clung to me, almost convulsively. Cairn was hurt with the child, and angry with me for holding him; and he bade me put him down, and not make a coward of him. And I smiled; and said, laying my hand on this little book—'Husband, this is the weapon with which our boy will win us glory!' And I told him then of Archy's sayings. It touched him—almost drew tears to his eyes; and he placed his hand upon the child's head, and said, 'God bless him; he shall have his free choice of both.' Jean, he has tampered with and dishonoured both. Yea, both—both!"

Jean's whole body shook with the violent trembling of the hand that grasped her wrist; but her heart rejoiced, for she knew by that trembling—that broken voice—those slowly dropping tears, the worst was over, that love had conquered pride, and that Archy was safe.

"You will go to him," she ventured to whisper; "you will save him yet—won't you?" And Jean gazed up into the worn, furrowed face, that seemed to

have grown years older in the last half hour; hoping—yet dreading, a reply.

“Jean!”

“Mother!” She used the word with a sense that Archy's whole future might be hanging on the mother's resolve; and yet sick of herself the instant it had passed her lips.

“Jean, how are we to do this?”

Jean's little wash-leather purse came forth, and was laid on the spelling-book.

“It's what I put by for a time like this. I think there's enough.”

There was silence again—silence on both sides. Jean feared to say any more, and Mrs. Cairn could not speak. Oh, how well Jean knew the sufferings of that pained pride; and how she dreaded the revival of the former bitterness in the mother's heart. So she came close to her, put the purse timidly into her hands, closed the unwilling fingers over it, and then—in a voice that was strangely sweet and pathetic, as coming from Jean—she once more murmured—

“Mother!”

The two wan faces looked into each other, through the deepening twilight, and met. No more differences that night.

Two hours later, weary, but still sleepless, the two lay down side by side in the little bedroom up-stairs; talking over all their arrangements for the journey, the start to-morrow morning, and of the future which Miss Addersley's words had opened to them; Jean listening to, and talking of happiness that she was quite sure would never be hers, but which she must

appear to believe in, lest her little help should be refused when it was so much needed, and so comforting her older companion until she fell asleep; when Jean turned away with her despair, almost passionately hugging it, as it were, to her breast, lest she might be induced suddenly to believe all this semblance real, and awake to a deeper suffering and humiliation than any she had yet tasted. And so she lay, all the long, weary night—her sad eyes never once closing—never once quitting that dim line of sky that appeared over the low window curtain, until the cocks began to crow to each other from distant farm-yards, and the new light broke in pale streaks of red behind the tops of the three poplars. And then—just when Jean thought she must get up—there was silence, cessation of pain and thinking, and an hour or more of peaceful, blessed, sleep.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. DELL'S STUDIO.

“NOW, ladies, tell me candidly, do you think Raphael himself could have painted under such circumstances?”

Bursts of laughter, from Mrs. Dell and Grace, are the only answer.

“Well, be warned, for I am growing savage, and may do that which you will be sorry for. Have you any more questions to put, Mrs. Dell? I have told you, with wonderful patience I think, why I thus darken my room; why I prefer to stand while painting; why I put my crayons here and nowhere else, and must have that particular shade of paper for my first sketches, and no other; why I choose to keep my studio in this ‘blessed mess,’ as you are pleased to call it; why I think it *is*, on the whole, worth my while to try to paint; why I don’t generally admit any body here, and especially ladies; why I have let you both in to-day; and why—if you don’t behave better—I shall turn you both out again, and never more try such a weak experiment.”

“Ah, but Grace, he hasn’t told us yet—has he?—why he goes on painting subjects, with our help as models, without obtaining our previous permission to

his making such displays of us ; and why he won't even let us see what he is doing ! How do we know in what posture he will present us to posterity ? I declare it makes the flesh of my ghost-body creep as I feel it walking through the long gallery up-stairs some two hundred years hence, and coming to a picture, and there recognising myself, in—oh, I dare not imagine what guise, or drapery, or absence of drapery ! ”

“ Well, dear, I must say he ought to let us have some voice in the matter, certainly.”

“ Come then, ladies, a compromise. I am not particularly in love with the subject I have begun, so give me another. Grace, what say *you* ? ”

“ Oh, no ; I can't suggest anything.”

“ Then, Mrs. Dell, if—as I suspect—all this is your planning, and subtle contrivance, in order that you may be once more master, even here—in my own especial domain,—out with it ; impose your gracious commands, and let me see whether I shall obey, or turn rebel in sheer self-protection.”

“ And in the cause of high art ? ”

“ Come, come, madam, no more mockery. What is that little paper that I have seen peeping out of your tightly-closed hand for some time past—eh ? ”

Winnie gave a half-laugh, but somehow it seemed to subside into a smile, and that again into a deep blush, as she allowed Mr. Dell to unclose, one by one, the pretty little fingers. I don't think he would have succeeded, but for an unfair advantage he took while Grace was looking another way—he kissed them, and they loosened at once. Triumphantly he called out to

Grace, "I have it! Now we shall see what all this rebellion in the place means. Here is the arch-offender's own involuntary confession." He began to read—"Lady Hester: a Legend of Grey Ghost Walk.' Why, didn't I tell you that Grey Ghost Walk had no legends."

"For that very reason, cousin, I am glad Winny has given us one. That is a favourite walk of mine. Come, I grow curious; read it!"

Mr. Dell did so, with eager, glowing eyes; but at first in silence. When he had finished he came to his little wife, who sat now very pale and tremulous, seeing that her fondly-guarded secret of poetical tastes, and struggles, and ambitions, must be acknowledged; and that the sense of responsibility, the fear of criticism, the shame of failure, must all now be encountered. Her husband came to her, took her hand, looked into her face with a mute eloquence of affectionate respect, deep sympathy, and manly pride, that gave only too much meaning to the single kiss he pressed upon the tearful, yet glad face. Winny was in no danger of mistaking him; was incapable of drawing more from his encouragement than he had intended. She knew him too well to suppose he rated very highly, as poems, these her first utterances; but it was everything to her to be assured that he did not look upon her as fostering an absurd delusion. It would have alarmed her beyond measure to be called a poet. That was a word to her of awful, super-humanly beautiful meaning. But she only gave due play to her own instincts when she thought it possible she might in time become a poet.

And if even in that she were deceived, it was at all events pleasant and consolatory to be deceived in such companionship.

Mr. Dell again read the paper through, and then said hastily, "I will paint this picture. I will begin at once. Grace, you must read it aloud to me. If you like it—and I am sure you will—do your best to set me off. Throw yourself into the feeling of the chief person. Be Lady Hester. I couldn't possibly have a more beautiful model—(no, no, cousin, *we* don't compliment, you know that); not one whose style of beauty could be more appropriate. Lady Hester's bearing is that of a high-born woman, of majestic presence; somewhat reserved I imagine, but with that in her which rare occasions alone can bring forth. You will fail in one thing, I fear."

"And what is that, cousin?"

"You won't be able to bring forth the bad feelings strong enough. Excuse the word, you can't play the devil. But that is where the dramatic art serves us—whether we are painters, or actors, or simply sympathetic readers. You have that art, Grace, strongly from Nature. Be an actress, therefore, for once: throw yourself into Lady Hester with all the power of your imagination, of your will, your wish to please and to benefit me—and of your hatred towards anybody else, if—which I don't believe—there is any one in this wide world you can hate. You will see that Lady Hester has a strongish infusion of that quality. Now, stand there, as though you were descending a turret staircase, and your foot were leaving the last step at the bottom. Now, Mrs. Dell—ah, capital! your

white dress is just suited for the occasion ; only let me give you this bride-favour ; it's dusty, I know, but 'twill do. An artist, you see, has all sorts of out-of-the-way things ready at his call. Now, begin. Stay, just a moment, while I modify the light. That's it." He paused, and regarded them attentively. "Yes, couldn't be better. Now, Grace."

And Grace read,—

LADY HESTER.

A LEGEND OF GREY GHOST WALK.

WHEN the ruddy sunset stained
All her casement,—diamond-paned,
Triumphant joy possessed her :
"He has sued me for his son ;
Wealth, dominion, all are won ;"—
Cried the Lady Hester.

When sweet moonshine bathes her bower,
Leaning forward from the tower,
Familiar tones arrest her ;
Footsteps in the chestnut walk,
Low-hushed hum of lovers' talk,
" 'Tis he !" breathed Lady Hester.

She heard the murmur sink and swell ;
She heard the name of Isabel ;
Tumultuous fears possessed her.
"Ah, no," she heard, "by Heaven I swear,
He shall disown me as his heir,
Ere I wed Lady Hester !"

Again rich flooding sunlight stained
Her little lattice, diamond-paned ;
Deep shame and hate possessed her.
A figure 'neath the chestnuts came,
" 'Tis she !"—with brow and cheek a-flame,
Low hissed the Lady Hester.

THE SHADOW IN THE HOUSE.

Her foot was on the turret stair ;
Her shoulders, from the chilly air,
 The loosened robe scarce covered ;
Her hair, as raven's plumage black,
In two wild masses floating back,
 Like pinions round her hovered.

Her dark eyes flashed with fearful light ;
She met her in her bridal white,
 And by her breast-knot seized her ;
And gazed and gazed her beauty through,
As from it deadlier hate she drew,
 And conscious power appeased her.

She held her back against the gate ;
She gazed out all her strength of hate,
 Until the curse possessed her :
Till strange cries haunted hill and heath ;
Till stony grew the face beneath
 That curse of Lady Hester.

“ Ah, glorious, Grace, glorious ! Don't change or move limb or muscle. Be silent both. Think, Grace, I beg you, of every ill deed, or unlucky word, I or anybody else ever said to your injury or annoyance ; and especially don't pity her—the poor thing in white there. Back with her to the gate ! Fine ! fine ! Oh, let me but do justice to you, Grace, and you shall be immortal.”

He worked on, minute after minute, with a kind of madness. Once, when he raised his eyes to that face, they became fascinated. He threw down his brush ; and, pushing the hair from his moist brow, he gazed as in a dream upon the fearful strength of that white clenched hand, and those stormy square brows, lowering over the orbs of burning light. There was a weak suppressed cry, something between a laugh and

a scream. His eyes then fell on another face, white, awe-stricken. He rushed forwards, and caught his wife in his arms, but she broke from him, laughing, and crying out,

“Oh, Grace, how you frightened me!” Her voice was so tremulous and low that Grace roused herself, and a faint flush overspread her cheek, as she stole a rapid, searching, half-alarmed glance at Mr. Dell's face. The eyes of the three met; and then there was a burst of sudden and musical laughter from Grace, which was more than echoed by the responsive outbursts of Mr. and Mrs. Dell.

“What, Winny,” cried the former, as there was a moment's pause,—“like the engineer, hoist with your own petard?”

CHAPTER IX.

JEAN'S DOWRY.

IF the first effects of mental trouble are depressing (as though it had been determined we must be stopped in our mid-career, and brought face to face with fresh experiences), when that first shock passes away, and a gentler sorrow sways in turn, and a kind of holy dew falls upon the soul, the results are often to leave a greater strength behind; and to give to the mind a renewed sense of elasticity, that enables it to look unmoved on the possible recurrence of further pain, yet feel reviving the while, old and pleasurable instincts. So was it with Mrs. Cairn under the humble and kindly ministrations of Jean. She felt the maiden's love for ever around her; she believed also in her son's love for herself, in spite of his errors; and, if she looked back, she remembered how devotedly attached to her the Quartermaster had always been: these were things that enabled Mrs. Cairn to bear much humiliation and distress without repining. But, alas! for poor Jean: past, present, and future were alike a desert to her! And had not the same sense of duty that laid such heavy burdens upon her brought also its own secret and subtle compensations, she would have failed, and dropped down by the wayside.

Poor Jean ! There was seemingly nothing elastic now about her. She gave way, meekly bending ever lower and lower to each new pressure of Fortune's hand, except when either of the two dear ones who possessed her heart were threatened ; then she seemed to rise, to dilate, to recover in an instant much of the lost ground ; and so the very excess of her suffering was that which alone enabled her to continue to bear suffering at all. While, therefore, Mrs. Cairn, in the early morning of the day immediately following the night of their arrival, moved on through the streets of Chatham, buoyant, hopeful, full of a thousand professional recollections of her and her husband's former life, which were naturally suggested by the sights and sounds of the place ; while she took upon herself the task of explaining to Jean, with a kind of garrulous pride, whatever she thought might interest her ; and that made Jean—who had never viewed Mrs. Cairn in any other light than as the stern, patient, and learned schoolmistress of Yelverton—look up in amazement at the manly almost jocund expressions that burst from her, when some objects around brought back the old life of action and excitement, which had been hers before she settled down, on her husband's death, with a stern sense of duty, to a vocation previously so little to her tastes,—while Mrs. Cairn was thus unusually demonstrative,—Jean, on her part, could neither reciprocate the inward feeling, nor listen very earnestly to the flood of outward talk. She could only continue secretly to ask herself,—How should she meet Archy—how speak to him—how let him see (without risking expla-

nations, undesirable alike for both), that she had long ago released him in her thoughts from the early engagement they had entered into ?

The morning was one of those delicious ones that are in themselves enough to take away half the miseries of the world they gladden ; to make invalids feel well again, and healthy people long for some extraordinary things to achieve, worthy of the new energies that seem to quicken with the dancing blood. Every man, woman, or child, the travellers met, seemed for once to have something in hand which it was a conscious pleasure to perform. The blind beggar on the door-step of the unlet house, with upraised face and winking eyes, seemed to have actually forgotten the coveted halfpence, and to be drawing in and in fresh and fresh draughts from the vigorous life of the sun. Then there was music perpetually rising and falling in the air, just as it was caught or lost in the distance ; and then again, at intervals, came the spirit-stirring blast of the trumpet, rousing even in Jean's feeble military tastes a sudden sense of all the

“Pomp, pride, and circumstance of glorious war.”

The “Jolly Soldier,” to which they had been directed by Archy's letter, was, they were told, a little beyond the Marine Barracks. So they went along nearly to the further extremity of the town, until they saw through an opening on the left, the face of the hill, with its heights everywhere studded with cannon. Winding round with the road they came to a draw-bridge, and Jean read with alarm the words—

“Drive slowly over the bridge.”

She looked down, timidly, to see if the supports were unsafe, or if she was passing through some terrible military snare which might be dangerous to the uninitiated. Mrs. Cairn laughed, and made Jean look down into the great trench below them, the narrow bottom of which was probably not less than forty feet deep; while the broad top, measuring across from the edge of one sloping wall to the other, appeared to be as many wide.

“That’s for the Frenchmen, my girl, when they land. Nice place, you see, for them to walk into, if only they would be so good as to keep there. And look, Jean, where the trench, as it extends straight up the hill, makes a turn to the right; you see, there, those openings in the earth, and in the masonry, don’t you?—well, that’s where our countrymen would prepare politely to look out, to see what was going on, and to extend their helping hands to the coming guests. Ah, Jean, my girl, you can’t see, as I can, what death and destruction lurks within those now quiet openings; what volleys of musketry, what storms of shot and shell; what avalanches of troops, bursting down and sweeping away all before them; in a word—what a hell this morning’s paradise might be suddenly changed into by a few bands of our fellow-creatures being suddenly found trying to go up, or to cross over this trench, and a few other bands of our fellow-creatures seeing decided reasons to prevent them. But come, let us ascend to the heights. I should like to show you the heights; it won’t detain us long, and perhaps I may not feel disposed to come here again. Another bridge, you see, across the trench.

“There, girl, now we have reached the top, and can see where we are, and what lies about us. That magnificent river is the Medway. When last I was upon it I counted above forty men-of-war lying there. All this great space between us and the river is called the Lines—the famous ‘Chatham Lines.’ I have seen some fine sights there in my time. Ah, how often have I talked about them, and sighed for a sight of them, in India, and in Canada, and upon that miserable rock of Gibraltar, for I have been in all those places, Jean, in my time.

“You see, Jean, don’t you, how all these batteries command the river, and every possible mode of approach? True hospitality, you know, always likes to step out as far as possible to welcome the stranger. When he comes closer he will find the breastworks;—see there, and there!—those little slopes with a low wall at the top are called breastworks. The soldiers load at the bottom, run up the slope, say what they have to say, or, as they are not naturally so eloquent as the strangers, let their guns speak for them, and then as rapidly descend again. Jean, would you believe it, I have loaded guns for my husband in just such a position, when he was commanding a small party upon the hills in India, and we beat the enemy off—by Heaven we did, Jean; and I had much to do to quiet their jokes about making me Commander-in-Chief.”

“Well, but Mrs. Cairn,” said Jean, moved by the enthusiasm of the Quartermaster’s widow, whose eye literally blazed as she saw rising before her so many deeply interesting things, which she had thought she

had altogether forgotten or ceased to care about; "Well, but Mrs. Cairn, suppose they did get even within these breastworks, would it be all over then? And would the Arsenal, and the stores, and the—the—"

"All over, you simple child! Why that to British soldiers would scarcely be the beginning. Say the Frenchmen are here, as many thousands strong as you please; well, they won't want to stay on these heights, to be a mark for the kind attentions of the whole garrison; no, they must descend—and how? See, I will show you; come along. These are the roads down to the dockyard. Nice winding roads, aren't they? Nicely shut in, aren't they? Just a little sky, you see, above; that's all. Nice perpendicular walls to climb. Heaven help the poor soldiers that were compelled to pass through this valley, which would be to them no valley of the shadow of death—but death itself—merciless, wide sweeping, horrible."

Jean began to understand now something of the strength of Chatham; and to feel a sort of inkling of rapidly increasing military knowledge; and a quiet confidence not only as to her own particular safety, but as to that of Chatham, and Britain at large, when she was rather taken aback by Mrs. Cairn's next observations.

"And if all that didn't do to stop them, what then, Jean?"

"Can't imagine, I'm sure."

"We"—that was Mrs. Cairn's own word, "we should blow up the whole place—trenches, roads,

breastworks, magazines, nay, the very hill itself, with all who were upon or among them."

"Mercy on me—how would you do that?"

"Why, Jean, you can't be sure you tread on a single foot of solid ground hereabouts. No—no, child: don't be afraid. It won't be your little foot that will discover the abysses beneath. Why, there are underground communications running about in all directions, and connecting together the most distant points; and what would these subterranean ways be but so many mines, child, if they were wanted; mines, to blow us all up if the time were come?"

"Ah, well," said Jean, "I hope the Frenchmen will be wise enough to keep away, both for their own sakes and ours."

"Oh, for that matter, Jean, I wish them no harm, if they will only understand this is our country, and not theirs; and that we will allow no sort of liberties to be taken with it. There are guests, you know, that if they once get into your house, you can't get rid of; we must have no more guests of that kind in England, eh, Jean?"

Mrs. Cairn turned, and saw Jean had stopped opposite the gate of some barracks they were passing. The gate was closed, but there was a crowd outside, waiting apparently for some unusual exhibition. Mrs. Cairn drew near to Jean, and also tried to gain some glimpse of what was passing within. In answer to an inquiry a man said he had been told a soldier was going to be drummed out of the regiment.

"What for?"

"Bad character."

"Do you know his name?"

"Martin Todd, or Dodd; I don't know exactly."

Jean, who had hastily put these questions, with a feeling she would not like to have owned now that she saw it was mistaken, was for passing on, though not the less nervously dreading that interview that might soon be taking place at the "Jolly Soldier." But Mrs. Cairn, to whom every incident brought fresh matter for recollection, stopped her, saying—

"Let us see what passes. Perhaps there may be some officers of 'ours' here. An old friend of Archy's father might be useful, if any such person could be found after all these years. It is not the Quartermaster's regiment, I see; but then you know, officers shift about so."

Drawing as near as the crowd will permit them, the two women peer curiously through the iron railings.

The ordinary exercises of morning parade seem at present to be engaging attention. There is a considerable number of soldiers drawn up in a double line on the further side at the bottom of the sloping ground; and extending not only along the whole line of barrack front, but curving round the extremities of the parade. An aged-looking officer is giving the word of command, standing alone in the centre:—

"The Lieutenant-Colonel, Jean," observed Mrs. Cairn; "he is the actual commander of the regiment."

"I should have thought that magnificent-looking man with the white feathers, standing by the band there, had been the head," replies Jean.

"He!" and Mrs. Cairn fairly laughs out—and

some of the bystanders, who have overheard, join in ;
“ why, that ’s the drum-major ! ”

Poor Jean doesn’t know what that means, and doesn’t care to illustrate the state of her military knowledge by any further questions, and so looks on silently henceforth.

A knot of officers are standing on the steps of the Adjutant’s office to the right of the entrance ; and the band occupies a corresponding position by the guard-room on the other side. There, too, stands the Adjutant of the regiment, with a paper in his hand, ready to read some document from head-quarters. To complete the picture, a soldier, an orderly, with no other arms than a stick, walks continually to and fro close by the gate, looking as though he knows something of importance is to be done, although his lips are sealed.

For some little time, however, nothing occurs to arrest attention, unless it be the pleasant way in which the tediousness of the manœuvres is broken up as it were and relieved, by the constantly recurring snatches of music from the band, and which are as exhilarating as the morning itself. Surely no punishment can be here impending ! Alas, for the poor wretch who listens, if there be.

But now there is a sudden and dead silence, broken again, for an instant, by a word of command. The petty officers step forward from the ranks with their swords raised, and stand in front of the long line, while the double row of soldiers faces the gate. Hark ! it is the Adjutant who speaks. With a clear loud voice, penetrating to the furthest corner of the ground, he

reads from the paper in his hand the terms of a sentence passed upon one Martin Todd. But he reads fast, and in a mechanical routine sort of manner, that makes the result little else than voice to those present; to those, at all events who, like Mrs. Cairn and Jean, are without the gates. In vain do they strive to understand its tenor after the first few words; they catch the name, and that is about all they can rely on. In vain also, like many of those around, have they tried to separate the culprit from the mass. But now, as the Adjutant concludes, there is a movement among the group by his side, and a man, bare-headed, walks forth, and the magnificent drum-major by his side.

Mrs. Cairn happened at that moment to look at Jean's face. O God! Will she ever forget the expression she saw there?—or the instantaneous frightful rush of the blood to her own brain, as she understood, with intuitive perception, what it was that Jean saw—and that, in truth, Martin Todd was her own son—Archibald Cairn. For an instant or two Jean had no eyes or thoughts even for the stricken mother. Her whole soul was absorbed in the one idea—too vast, too hideous yet for her even dimly to comprehend, that that was Archy—her Archy—the scholar and the gentleman of her imagination, treated as infamous. Mrs. Cairn clutched at Jean's arm, to save herself from falling with the sickness that seized her; Jean turned mechanically—saw who it was, and at once renewing the eternal struggle with self—murmured—

“Wait! wait! Don't judge.”

And Mrs. Cairn did wait. Both were for the moment supported in an unreal strength for endurance by the awful fascination which such calamities, while in actual progress, will exercise.

They saw the drum-major come to the miserable man, who appeared buried in a stupor; they saw him cut off from Archy's coat the cuffs and collar,—those military facings which, in modern times, are held to be as symbolical of the military profession and honour as were the spurs in the days of chivalry. They saw the pieces flung to the ground, as they were torn away, with an expression of measureless contempt; they saw a drummer-boy advance, with a long halter in his hand, having at one end a wide loop or noose, which the drum-major passed over the man's neck.

Jean now turned, and exclaimed, in a hoarse whisper—"You must go. I will see you to some safe place for awhile, and then—"

But Mrs. Cairn, with lips that met like the iron lips of a vice, and hands that seemed to have the strength and tenacity of the same instrument, as they forcibly restrained Jean from making the slightest movement, forbad all further question; and Jean turned to watch the whole of the sickening ceremony.

A pair of boards was now brought forward, each bearing the inscription—"A notoriously bad character." They were hung round the culprit's neck, one resting against his breast, the other displayed upon his back. Thus arrayed, he was placed at the head of a procession, having on each side of him a soldier with naked bayonet, and followed by the drummer-boy, holding the end of the halter. After these came the

magnificent drum-major, stalking alone in his glory, with plumes portentously nodding, and after him followed the band, two and two.

The music now burst forth.

"The Rogue's March, Jean," said Mrs. Cairn, with a terrible meaning and eloquence in the tone.

And so the pageant moved on to the left, through the open ground in the centre of the parade, until it reached the curving end of the double line of soldiers; then it turned and followed that line, keeping so close to it, in front, that every man could see even the slightest play of the muscles in the offender's face, until the opposite curve was reached at the other end of the parade.

"Halt!" thundered the Lieutenant-Colonel. And then, as he again gave a word of command, a movement took place all along the line; and in another moment the two lines were facing each other, forming a lane between them.

"March!" again shouted the guiding voice. The procession turned round, went through the lane, thus retracing its steps; in order, apparently, that those men who were previously at the back should all be able to see, more closely, the brother who was to be cut off, like a moral gangrene, from their body.

Simultaneously a soldier left the guard-room, bearing a knapsack and a canvas bag. There was no mistaking their meaning.

Mrs. Cairn almost laughed out, as she said—"That's your dowry, my girl."

But Jean, beyond a dim sense of something frightful in the sound of the mother's voice, hears nothing—

sees nothing—feels nothing that extends a hair's breadth beyond the central figure of that spectacle in front.

Soldiers come to the gates, and throw them wide apart, and the procession advances towards them. Jean sees, but has neither time nor power left to think what she shall do; every energy of her mind, every muscle of her body is paralyzed; and Mrs. Cairn still presses on her with a constantly increasing weight. Yes, the procession comes to the gates, passes through them into the road, until Archy, in his place, is also beyond the garrison limits; then they remove the halter and the boards; they put the knapsack and bag by his side—they say, in effect to him, “You are free—and infamous”—and so retire and leave him.

Archy moves mechanically to take up his knapsack, but feels a hand upon his arm. He looks up, and there is a great cry heard from him, but not of joy—nor of greeting;—a cry impossible to be described. His face at the same moment blazes with emotions that play over it, now redly lurid—now deeply black, as though the fires and smoke of some volcano had suddenly blazed forth, and lit it up. But before Jean can speak, or be spoken to, that cry is answered by another, and fainter one—Mrs. Cairn has fallen senseless—the blood is oozing from her lips.

Archy sees—in an instant he is at his mother's feet.

And this was the meeting of mother and son!

CHAPTER X.

MOTHER AND SON.

IT is an old story, that of the many waiting on the aspect of the one ; a king perhaps, or a great minister, watched by hungry expectants ; laughing when he smiles, wretched when he frowns ; their entire lives apparently incorporated with his, knowing only his will and wish, all their faculties submissively offered up as so many instruments for the furtherance of his views. But greater in this way than king, or the mightiest of kingly ministers, is the minister of the body politic, the high priest of Nature, the passer to and fro between the domains of Life and Death, the witness to so many struggles between those ever-warring potentates ; who, as if in despair of completely foiling each other, or perhaps in sheer weariness, sometimes make him the arbiter betwixt them, to decide the issue for many a poor human creature, hanging breathlessly on the fiat, which his lips will, also, first make known to them. What is courtier—or any other worldly—homage to this ? What following, however numerous or individually noticeable, can rival his—the Doctor's—who sees in every questioning eye, every faltering lip, every changeful face, only so many faithful messengers waiting to

carry back tidings that may spread the deepest shade or the brightest sunshine through those under-worlds of life, which are in fact the only real worlds ; as we all find out at such periods ; and, as many of us discover, we have found out too late. What royalty hath homage like this ? What costly favours can kings confer, that shall equal in their effect upon us the simple words that yonder plain-looking man, in the dark surtout, whispers—with a grasp of the hand and a slight smile—“ Yes, the danger is over ? ” When the satiated monarch offered his princely rewards for a new pleasure, why did not some one claim them, by saying, “ O king, learn how to save the life of but one of the humblest of thy subjects, and they who love that life will give thee all thou desirest ! ”

I will not say that Archy, as he watched by the corner of a street, the day after the terrible meeting with his mother, for the coming of Dr. Simpson, had thoughts like these ; for his emotions were of that tumultuous nature which preclude thought, or at least concentrate it upon the fewest possible ideas, and with an entire absence of generalisation. But what he did think was only a series of individual variations of the same broad theme. “ Will she recover ? How much longer will this man be ? Can I—can any human agency that I might set in operation, save her ? O God, if my life might but be accepted ! I hear wheels. No, not his. This doctor, does he know—is he capable of feeling what hangs upon him ? Has he the requisite skill ? Could he not be changed, if— Ah ! he comes.”

A plain-looking brougham drove rapidly up the street, and was about to turn the corner, when Archy's hasty movement and gesture caused the inmate to pull the check-string, and stop.

"Excuse the interruption, but my name is Cairn."

"What, the son of my patient?"

"Yes. May I be permitted to tell you, what others perhaps may wish to keep secret, the cause of her sudden illness?"

Before the doctor answered this question, he looked at Archy with a searching eye, gauging him, as it were, from head to foot. He saw a slight, but well made, and peculiarly upright figure, in shabby black clothes, worn however with that indefinable air that proclaims the gentleman. His face was haggard and careworn—how changed from the ruddy-cheeked, glossy-curled youth of Jean's picture!—but handsome and manly in its expression, though indicating no claims to the sterner traits of manly character. Satisfied, apparently, with his scrutiny, the doctor answered—

"Certainly; the knowledge may be useful."

"She met me suddenly, under circumstances that led her to suppose I had been guilty of conduct that had made me infamous. I had not time to explain; nor do I know that any explanation at the moment would have convinced her. But, O sir, she will die; I feel sure she will die, under this serious injury, unless she can be brought to believe differently."

Dr. Simpson gave a dry cough, and paused before he spoke again; and then his words implied to

Archy's ear a cruel indifference, that made his very soul tremble.

"I fear, my friend, you forget that I am a doctor—not a confessor." But as he spoke, he gazed searchingly into Archy's face, with eyes that had often brought to light hidden truth upon unwilling faces; that had even, on one occasion, told their owner he had deadly guilt before him, and had prepared the way for the conviction of the criminal. But Archy met that piercing gaze with even deeper earnestness; and although his face grew at once crimson and dark as he spoke, he never for an instant quailed under the steady look of the doctor.

"I have behaved ill—foolishly—weakly—but, on my soul, sir, not criminally; and all I ask is, that my mother shall know that I stake willingly all her future favour upon the event of my proving this to her, and upon my undoing that which she has seen done. But, O sir, perhaps, while we talk she is dying;—perhaps before this can even be said to her, which might inspire new life, she may be dead!"

"Are you in danger through this affair, whatever it may be?"

"No; it is past—in that respect."

"You have been a soldier? Nay, it is useless to suppose that I could not see that—and yet you do not look like a private. Well, I am not fond of dabbling in matters that don't concern me, and still less so in matters that I do not fully understand. But I am inclined to believe what you say, and will see if I can make any use of the fact."

Archy's grateful look and respectful drawing back

terminated the dialogue. The brougham drove on to the door of the little lodging-house, where Mrs. Cairn and Jean had taken up their abode for the night, when they reached Chatham; and which they now found would have to be their abode for many a night; perhaps only to be quitted by one of them alive. Archy waited, almost counting every second of time that passed during the first five minutes, and then feeling a sense of alarm, that grew every instant stronger, at the unexpected delay in the doctor's reappearance. Again he passed, as he had done scores of times already, before the window, looking up; though quite aware, through Jean, that the sick-room was at the back of the house, and altogether out of the range of his vision. He became so oppressed that he thought he would walk away a little, to recover himself, before again speaking to the doctor. He did so; then heard suddenly the rumbling of wheels, turned, and beheld the brougham rolling away, at a rapid pace, in an opposite direction. Did the doctor then avoid him! Or was she in such danger that he was about to seek additional aid? O God! He must—he would see her. He hurried along the street, but stopped, as he reflected—"Perhaps he has spoken to her, and she has convinced him I am a liar—has told him all—and he has given me up, and wishes me to understand by his behaviour how he will treat me if I again address him! Ah, doctor, we'll see to that, if the matter prove worth seeing to. I *will* go in. Jean said I must not come—not yet—not even to speak to her. But I know what she meant. It was not that she could not leave my mother, even for a

single instant, as she said ; no, it was that she dreaded lest my mother might know that I was polluting the air in her neighbourhood by my presence. But Jean, at least, shall see me."

Archy went to the door, and knocked gently. It was opened by Jean herself, who had seen him in the street, and who now allowed him to follow her into an inner room ; where, for a moment or two, neither of them could speak to, or look upon, the other. But at last, steadying his voice as well as he could, he said :

"Jean, tell me truly, how is mother ?"

"Very bad."

"You mean"—he paused, with a kind of superstitious fear of the word—"dangerously so ?"

"Yes."

"Then, Jean, I must and will see her."

"Oh, Archy, will you throw away the one chance left us ?"

"Jean, Jean, I tell you," cried the young man passionately, "I know mother better than you do. It is my disgrace that is killing her. She could battle successfully with physical dangers a thousand times worse than this, if they were physical only ; but I know well what she is doing,—she is baffling you all. She is killing herself. It is her will to die. It is her only refuge, she thinks, against this dishonour !"

"And how will you change her belief ?"

"Jean, I said nothing to you, I think, when we met, but the bare words, 'I am innocent ; on my soul, I am innocent !' I can say no more to you now—but do you believe me ?"

"I do, Archy, I do indeed," was the sudden, decided reply; so sudden and so decided, that Archy, who had expected there was a great battle to be fought with Jean, but one that he could not pause to fight now, whilst the more critical one with his mother lay beyond—the only struggle he could at present see or think of,—Archy was so stopped by the words and tone, that he could not but feel himself suddenly unmanned; and thus, while he took her hand, and murmured—"God bless you, Jean," the tears began to roll down his thin cheeks. As for Jean, I know not what moved her, for the blood rushed to, and then from, her brow, and her whole frame became so tremulous, that Archy thought she would fall; and he came to her, tenderly, and supported her while he reached a chair and made her sit.

"I—I—am worn out with want of sleep, and—and —" was all poor Jean could say.

"Well now, Jean, attend to me. I see the danger on both sides. Perhaps mother will not listen to me; perhaps the attempt to make her do so may be fatal. I know that. But, on the other hand, she is dying—I feel sure of it; and I, who inflicted the blow, must try to save her from the consequences. If she would but open her heart for a single instant to me; nay, if she would only admit the thought, as a mere possibility, that I may be undeserving of the treatment I have received, she would gradually change, until at last I might tell her my whole story; and then, she would have but one feeling, one desire, to help me to right myself."

"It has been tried, and failed."

“ You mean — ? ”

“ The doctor began to speak to her about you—(I knew then that you had seen him),—and there was a recurrence of the attack, so violent, that I thought she would have died before its cessation. The doctor himself was frightened out of all his ordinary calmness.”

Poor Archy!—he stood as one paralysed, as he heard that. It seemed to destroy the only hope that had been buoying him up.

“ I must go back to her,” said Jean, moving slowly away; after trying in vain to shape out one word of comfort for the miserable man.

“ Jean, tell me this, and I will be guided by your answer, as to what I will do. Before the doctor spoke, did he find her at all better? Had he then any decided hope? ”

Jean hesitated to answer, and Archy saw that she did so. Again he slowly but firmly repeated the words of the question. Jean felt constrained in truthfulness to reply—

“ No,—he seemed uneasy about her,—and he drew me aside, and said, ‘ I think I must try to turn her thoughts—I fear she is not helping us, as she should. Are you in her counsel? ’ I said, Yes. ‘ And in his? ’ he continued, looking at me; and I said—believing you would have wished me to do so—Yes. ‘ Ah, very well,’ he exclaimed; and then he went to your mother, and said he had something to say to her that she ought to hear. But she discovered it in an instant—looked at me, oh with such reproach, thinking it was my doing, and said, ‘ Is it about him,

doctor?—' but she could say no more, for the blood that—"

"Well, Jean, desperate measures are sometimes the most prudent. Possibly, after all, he may have done some good. She may regret she prevented him from speaking. She is naturally just. Yes, I will believe he has done some good. And if, now, she can but be made to hear that I wish her to live to see me clear myself from this stain, she cannot altogether reject my prayer—cannot absolutely disbelieve me—she loves me too well for that. O Jean, do not fail me now. We must be bold. It is our only chance."

"The doctor has absolutely forbidden me to allow any one to see her, or to speak to her. Even I must be silent for the next few hours."

"And you promised him?"

"I did."

"That's enough. Now mark, Jean, I *will* go into my mother's bed-room. Any attempt to prevent me, can only destroy what little chance might otherwise arise through my speaking to her. You see that?"

"Yes."

"And you hear me say, I *will* go to her?"

"Yes."

"Now then, what will you do?"

Jean's eyes shut for a moment, as if to enable her to withdraw for a brief space from the world,—from him—from everything external, to commune with her own spirit alone; and take counsel as to how she should deal with the desperate man, whose alarming words yet vibrated in her ears—"I *will* go to her."

She looked up at last, and a sweet light seemed to have settled in her eyes, and a sweet, but very faint, smile ran over her face, as she put her hand out to Archy, and said—

“Perhaps you are right. Come!”

He grasped her hand, and followed her (not quitting his hold for an instant) into the dark passage; seeing nothing but the constant picture—of that dear yet terrible form lying prostrate on the bed, resolute, as he believed, to die without another word to any human being, and least of all to him. Jean stopped, and Archy’s heart seemed to stop too, before the door which now alone divided him from the reality of that picture. Jean turned the handle so noiselessly, that only senses like Archy’s could have perceived the sound; and then, loosening her hand, she motioned to him to stay there, while she advanced into the darkened chamber. Presently he heard a breathing, which was responded to by Jean; who evidently either repeated questions that she heard imperfectly, or thought she heard, or who was guessing at questions that she believed Mrs. Cairn wished to put; which of the two Archy could not discover.

“Did the doctor seem hurt?—Yes.”

A long pause.

“What did he want to say?—Why, that he fancied you are in error as to your son’s conduct—that he thinks he has been badly treated—and that you ought to get well, and look into the matter.”

“Ha!”

Archy heard that exclamation, and felt that his time was come. He knew, too well, the serious issue

pending. In a minute she might be—. But he would think no more—he must act. So, putting off his shoes, that he might make no noise, and with a feeling akin to the reverence with which eastern worshippers enter the threshold of a shrine, and which reminded him of boy-days, when his mother had often made him do the same thing, on entering her exquisitely clean kitchen, he moved a few paces forward; and then, in tones of thrilling, almost preternatural calmness, said—

“Mother, before it is too late, hear me—your son—say to you, that Jean’s words are true; that you shall yourself live to acknowledge they are true, if you will but now remember, that I have never, since that day in the orchard, told you a lie, or practised upon you one intentional deception. Mother, my life is your life. My present dishonour is yours. My future acquittal shall be yours too, or I will not trouble to seek it. I will say no more till you permit me.”

Poor Jean! how she hung upon every word, and how she dreaded that each would be followed by some fatal outbreak from the motionless form on the bed. But, to her inexpressible relief, Mrs. Cairn remained silent; until, out of the very silence, a new fear arose for both the agitated listeners—Had she fainted? Jean went to the bed-side, bent over towards the averted face, leant down, kissed it, saw shade by shade of sternness roll off, felt a great tear coursing down her own cheek, which would drop on the mother’s if she did not turn away—so she did turn, but too late, the big drop moistened that other cheek with a something which seemed natural there,

though springing from a foreign source, and at last there was a low breathing sound,—

“To-morrow?—Yes.—I will tell him.” These words, and another kiss, closed the dialogue. Archy had heard—with a mist before his eyes he silently felt for Jean’s hand, wrung it, and—disappeared.

CHAPTER XI.

AT MIDNIGHT.

AS Archy paced up and down, at midnight, the little bed-room at the top of a house which stood nearly opposite the one which contained his mother, and which he had secured that he might the better watch everything that passed, he stopped every now and then to look forth; and gaze yet once again upon that door and those windows, to see if he could draw any meaning out of their blank aspects,—any consciousness of what was going on behind them. This had become quite a habit with him during the few eventful hours that had just passed. He felt uneasy, if by any accident he had forgotten to look upon them for many minutes together. And now, as he did look, he saw the door open, and the woman of the house come forth, cross the street, and—yes—she was doubtless coming to him. He ran down, and received with agitated hands a scrap of paper, on which was pencilled,—

“Don’t be frightened. She is better in mind—you have done her good; but she seems to become more agitated in spirits, as she allows herself to think more justly of you, and that weakens her. I write to say, I dread the interview to-morrow. May I put it off, if she consents?”

JEAN.”

Archy immediately wrote on the back of the paper, also in pencil,—

“I leave all to you, Jean. Only save her,—and eternal blessings on your head! Let me hear as often as you can. A. C.”

The woman went back; and again Archy began his endless pacings to and fro, and his thoughts now took a turn. “My mother is in no condition to hear evidence—to balance opposing probabilities—suspending all judgment the while upon matters affecting her life, present and future, to the very core. No; and she will be herself the first to perceive hereafter, if she does not do it now, any flaws in my case. What then? Let me consider. All that can be done for her at present, seems to be, to make her practically realise the hope that I am innocent of any infamous act. Such a feeling would certainly buoy her up to struggle with this physical danger. Can I not, while sparing her for a few days the details, give her some additional proof, that she may have faith in me? Mr. Dell?—I have thought of him several times, but still I see nothing clear, as to what he could do in the matter. He might help me to re-establish my name, by-and-by, and probably would do so; but the present—the present—what can he now do to help my poor mother? Ha! what if I were to offer to submit the whole to him, and to abide by the result. If I cannot convince him, so that he will act for me, I am sure she will not remain convinced. What if Jean were to tell her this?”

Archy paused thoughtfully—then began to write; but tore up the paper and threw the fragments out of

the window. The cool night air played refreshingly upon his burning brow, and gave him strength. He again wrote, and then read to himself, in low tones, the following words,—

“Could you, do you think, persuade her to rest from all these terrible agitations, if, instead of my meeting her, you were to say that I have determined, now that she has once listened to me, to take a step more decisively calculated to assure her that I must be innocent, while sparing her all the torturing labour and suspense of listening to, and weighing, step by step, the significance and value of each detail of my story? What if I go to Mr. Dell, confide the whole to him, and ask my mother to receive his verdict, till she recovers, and can herself go calmly into the matter? What do you think? A. C.”

It was some time before he could resolve to deliver this; but at last he went down-stairs, opened the door softly, crossed, and tapped. The woman he had before seen, came immediately, and looked so anxious, that Archy forgot his errand, and gazed—with whitening lips, that could not frame themselves to utterance,—helplessly in her face.

“She be very bad—but, Lord love you, don’t you give way. You must keep up these poor creatures. I don’t know what’s amiss, that you knows best; but do you try to hearten them, that’s what they both wants; and that’s what she wants, more than the doctor.”

“You are right, quite right. I’m here now with a thought of that kind. Please give this note. I will wait, if you will permit me, till your return.”

The woman took the note, and went away. She was a long time gone. Was Jean considering?—or was his mother too ill for Jean to be able to attend to anything else? He heard the heavy, but muffled step slowly returning at last, and presently he read these lines,—

“I have ventured to read her your note, and I can see it has given great relief. You have anticipated thoughts that were in both our minds. I do think now she will rest. She has great confidence in Mr. Dell’s judgment; and altogether I can see your project helps to satisfy her. Wait till after the doctor’s visit in the morning. I will confide to him as much of what has passed as will enable him to judge of her state and prospects. If he thinks you may safely leave her, I recommend you to go away at once. It is her mind that has been so destroying her. I hope now you have changed her mind. JEAN.”

“I think she’s a little better,” said the woman.

“Yes, yes, I hope so.”

“Would you like to stay here to-night?”

“O, if you would but allow me!”

“To be sure. I haven’t a bed, but there’s the sofa.”

“Thank you, thank you!” said Archy abstractedly. After a while he observed to her, in a low tone,—

“Do you think my mother is asleep? If I could but look upon her for a single moment!”

The woman brushed away a tear from her eye, as she thought of a somewhat kindred scene, that had once happened between her and a son of her own; and somehow her heart yearned to the poor youth, and

she began to think he ought to be helped in such a natural request.

"I shall, for my mother's sake, probably go away to-morrow for several days, and therefore if I could now—"

"Well, wait a bit while I speak to the young woman you call Jean." She returned almost instantly.

"I was so frightened! I thought your mother was fast asleep, and I spoke, as I thought, very low, but she heard every word, and to my astonishment *she* says herself to me,—

"I should like to see him—we won't talk."

Archy was kneeling by his mother's bed-side before the woman was quite aware he had left her room. He put up his hand—hers met it. She felt his kisses upon the thin bloodless fingers. He felt himself drawn very gently. He half rose over the bed—crept nearer and nearer, till lips met, too long divided—and then he murmured,—

"No more, no more! I am happy. Let me rest here by your side, till you sleep." He felt the tender clasp answer him. He lay a little apart. Once the hand loosened itself; and, passing over his face and brow and through his hair, then returned to his hand. When Jean,—after a long silence, through which they might have heard her heart beat, had they been capable of any perceptions or emotions that lay beyond themselves,—came softly to look at them, she saw they were both asleep:—both looking so wondrously like each other, and the moisture still undried on both their cheeks.


Jean, who had shared all their trouble, took some

comfort from their solace. She drew the low arm-chair close by the bed-side, where she could look upon their two faces, and be ready to answer the slightest appeal. Poor girl!—she had forgotten for a moment, in the very unselfishness of her sympathy, that she ought not to trust herself to dwell upon that face; which, though sadly changed, was yet far more dangerous than the little picture she so sternly turned back to the wall in her own room at Bletchworth.

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. DELL'S INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD.

“OH dear, Oh dear!—was there ever such wretched weather for August? What, no fire!” And up went Mrs. Addersley's yellow jewelled hands and black eyes, whilst her sharp chin disappeared in her swan's-down wrapper, as she stood shivering at the door of the great drawing-room which had been prepared for the reception of the few relations and neighbours to whom it was necessary for Mr. Dell to introduce his wife. The chandeliers were not yet lit, either in this or in the “long room” beyond, the folding doors of which were thrown open; and the two wax candles burning dimly on the broad mantle-piece, made only a kind of twilight, in which gilded-mirrors, picture-frames, and cornices, shone out with a rich, subdued splendour. The window blinds were drawn down as low as the boxes of flowers. The waving shadows from the plants were thrown by the moonlight on the white and beautiful carpet. In the “long room,” which was left almost empty for dancing, the windows were wide open, and revealed the clear summer sky with its full moon and stars. It was the light breeze from these windows that met Mrs. Addersley as she opened the door, and that called forth her



exclamation about the weather. Presently, finding no one hurried forth to lead her to a chair, and to wrap her up, she stretched out her long yellow neck, and peered into the room, wondering if there was really no one there, when her eyes fell upon a white figure in a veil standing at a mirror, (which was opposite to another mirror,) and apparently engaged in gazing down the long vista of chandeliers formed by the reflections. It was so statue-like and still, that Mrs. Addersley had some difficulty in persuading herself that it was that "young romp," as she called Winny; and her voice was a little uncertain when she said, putting her foot on the threshold,—“Is that you, Mrs. Dell?” But it soon found its usual sharp tone as Winny sighed, then laughed, and then came to meet her.

“Some people have strange fancies, to like to stand here in such a dress as that, with all the windows open, letting in the nasty damp night air,—all in the dark too!” Mrs. Addersley then seated herself in a large arm-chair, by Winny, and chatted away to her; who, on her part, soon forgot her annoyance at being disturbed in the dreamy enjoyment of the mirror vista, the evening breeze, the silence, and the odours of the flowers she had herself gathered and arranged amongst the quaint old furniture.

“What! dressed, Winny?” said Mr. Dell joining them. “I can hardly see you in this light.”

“Oh, she looks very well,” said Mrs. Addersley, looking through her eye-glass, critically, at Winny’s simple wedding-dress: “Very well, but not of consequence enough for the belle of the evening.”

"We'll leave that to Grace," Winny said, laughingly.

"How late Grace is," remarked Mr. Dell, looking at his watch. "We shall have Sir George here presently."

"Can I go and help her, Mrs. Addersley?" Winny asked.

"Oh no, thank you, Mrs. Dell; she was dressed long before I came down: just giving the finishing touch, you know. By the bye, what an odd freak it was of hers to give the maid a holiday just as we were going out of mourning, and wanted so many new things. Grace has had to alter her dresses herself. She ought to know better than to spoil her figure by working all day, while that creature enjoys herself; but there!—Grace is quite falling into your English method of treating servants. O, here you are, Grace! Ah, you look yourself, to-night, child."

"Now, Winny, prepare your eyes for a perfect blaze of beauty," said Mr. Dell, as he lit the chandelier. "Really, Grace," he continued, drawing her under it, and turning to Winny with a smile,—who with her usual mode of expressing what she felt to be unspeakable admiration, was clapping her hands softly, with a half sigh,—“really this is hardly fair of her, is it Winny, to try to eclipse you to-night?”


"Hark!" exclaimed Winny, nervously. "I hear a carriage. Your uncle's perhaps." Mr. Dell hurried out, anxiously; for having received no answer to the invitation he had sent Sir George, he had begun to fear that his sudden determination to give up public life had seriously offended him.

Grace saw this anxiety with a certain pleasurable sensation as she glanced at herself in a mirror. Her dress, into which she had thrown all the taste of the artist, and the cunning of the woman, in order to give it the effect of rare elegance combined with apparent simplicity, was of Indian silk; costly in texture, yet so soft that it made not the slightest rustle when she moved. The colour was of deep rose pink; a well chosen one you could perceive, by the warm, rich glow it threw upon the arms and neck, that in a general way were almost too white to be perfect. Over this floated snowy lace of exquisite beauty; looped up on either side by a cord, with long pearl tassels;—the weight of which kept it from being lifted, as it would otherwise have been, at the slightest breath of air stirring near it. The bell-like sleeves (covered by the same lace, and edged by a narrow band of pearls, and pearl tassels, like those on the skirt) scarcely reached the beautifully rounded elbow; and a broader band of pearls at the top of the dress, fitted tightly round the shoulders. These bands, and tassels of pearls, were the only things in the shape of ornament she wore, except a red moss-rose, with long greeny bud and spray of leaves, that nestled in her pale brown hair where the crowning plaits met.

Winnie, a worshipper of beauty in all its forms, from the little wild flower by the way-side, to the majestic grandeur of the mountain height, felt her heart thrill when Grace smiled upon her;—smiled, triumphing in the power of her beauty, of which the reflection in that sweet, wistful face was so flattering. And with Winnie admiration was love; so that the

memory of the beautiful never died. The summers she had seen had each a separate glory of its own in her remembrance ; and she could call them up before her mind's eye, and distinguish them one from another, as a mother the faces of her dead children. Her soul was as full of love for the past as for the present. Now, under the fascination of the moment, she felt, as I have said, a thrill of almost passionate love for the woman who smiled down upon her, with a meaning she little guessed. Presently Winny pressed one of those beautiful arms to her heart and kissed it : Grace still smiling on, little moved,—for had she not seen Mrs. Dell kiss a flower in just the same way?


It was strange, but with all her care for her appearance, Grace had never, until to-night, cared much about studying the adornments of her own beauty. The heavy velvet robes, which she had constantly worn after laying aside the earliest garb of mourning, displayed only her queenliness : that was the effect she liked ; it satisfied—and harmonised with—her instinct of power ; the dress became a favourite one with her. But to-night, while she lost nothing of the stately bearing, the conscious majesty habitual to her person, she seemed to have gained wonderfully in the softer, more attractive, more womanly qualities, by the art with which she had arrayed herself ; art too, that was so disguised one could not tell in what it consisted. Grace had satisfied herself before she left her chamber ; she was still better satisfied when she saw the effect upon others. Yes, her first aim for the evening was achieved, and the fact augured well for the more important schemes she meditated.



It was not Sir George who returned with Mr. Dell to the drawing-room, but Mr. Nicholas Rudyard, the brewer and great man of Leatham. With him came his two elderly maiden sisters; who were soon engaged in condoling with Mrs. Addersley on the hopeless defects of the English climate. They were followed by Mr. Payne Croft, a barrister and an old friend of Mr. Dell's.

As Winny saw the lamps of more than one carriage shining through the dark firs along the drive, she ceased smiling behind her fan at Mr. Rudyard's big voice, and patronising manner to her husband; and felt herself growing nervous. Mr. Dell had predicted she would, but she had laughed at the idea, asking him if he supposed they had never had a party at the old farm, or at Laurel Cottage?

And now as, a little flushed, and a little trembling, she stood beside Grace to receive her husband's guests, and watched each group as it passed before her, she almost unconsciously contrasted them with the visitors at her father's house. She compared the stiff bow to the hearty squeeze of the hand; the awkward embarrassing silence, that in spite of everybody's exertions would reign now and then, to the boisterous mirth and chatter, in which one could not hear one's own voice, at those former meetings. But when Sir George Dell arrived, and saluted her with cold frigid politeness, and presented her with a magnificent bouquet in lace paper, a vision of uncle Josh with his round good-humoured face, and enormous bunch of flowers—which he never came without, which everybody laughed at, and which



everybody enjoyed,—rose up so vividly before her that she felt very much inclined to burst into tears before the eyes of all. But then she met Mr. Dell’s gaze, resting anxiously upon her; and she tried to shake off the images of home, and to restrain her childish emotions. And she succeeded: but still at times everything seemed to swim before her; she forgot names almost as soon as they were uttered; and once found herself addressing Mr. Mylde, the poor incumbent of Yelverton, as Mr. Staunton, the owner of the largest estate on this side of the county.

While yet suffering from the confusion of this discovery, which she imparted secretly to Grace, the latter said to her,—

“Oh, you will soon get over this nervous feeling. It is very natural at first. If we could only keep the people busy and amused, you would not fancy they thought so much of you.”

“Ah Grace, if you would do that for me!”

“You mean, dear—?”

“Oh, if you would but try to amuse them—to keep them as you say ‘busy—’ to talk to them, and make them talk to each other; so that Mr. Dell may not grow uncomfortable, thinking he sees *them* so.”

“I don’t think I could do much, but if you fancy—”

“Oh, I do—I do—and I should be so grateful.”

Grace pressed her hand in token of understanding, and lost no time in keeping her word. She went to Mr. Dell, and intimated what had passed; and although for the moment he looked doubtfully towards Winny, (and the mere fancy that it implied some sort of reproach cut her to the heart as she saw his glance,)

yet an instant after, he smiled, and then laughed right out at something Grace said to him whisperingly. Presently, the musical voice—the bubbling musical laughter, were heard—here—there—everywhere; a jet of sunshine seemed suddenly to light everybody up; the right people got comfortably together; and no matter what the topic, whether politics, society, gossip, church rates, the assizes, Puseyism, or the last new book, Grace had not only something to say that pleased the hearer, but that gave the said hearer a notion, which if utterable in words might have been to the effect,—“Really, a charming woman! What admirable sense and penetration! How thoroughly she appreciates one’s meaning and views!”

If Grace needed any fresh incentive to exertion she received it in a chance word that some one dropped to Mrs. Addersley, and which set that worthy lady laughing so vigorously that Grace came to ask her what was the matter; while half-a-dozen other ladies also paused to learn the source of the amusement of the “Indian lady.”

“Why, Grace, excuse my laughing—but—this gentleman and I have been discussing the bride; and though we both paid her many compliments, somehow we seemed to be contradicting each other at every word, yet with the most amiable unconsciousness of anything amiss; and so went on again—till it got too ridiculous—and then at last—he said—‘Surely, my dear madam, I have not mistaken the person?—that tall—elegant—’ I burst out, I couldn’t help it—‘Why, my dear sir, that is my daughter—Grace Addersley! Mr. Dell’s cousin, not his bride.’” Mrs. Addersley

again broke out into loud mirth, and the ladies around seemed to be half inclined to join. The gentleman referred to, Mr. Payne Croft, looked confused, and grew very hot in the face ; but he strove to carry the matter off as gaily as he could, by saying,—

“As a stranger personally to both ladies, I hope I may be pardoned my unlucky mistake ; yet in justice to myself and other gentlemen who may happen to be similarly situated, I would venture to suggest—that one is apt to come to such an assembly with highly wrought expectations ; there is something magical for a time at least in the word bride ; and then, too, every one knows Mr. Dell's tastes, position, and opportunities, so that if under such conditions one happens to see a form realising, nay, surpassing, all that—” The gentleman here thought he had gone far enough, and bowed to Grace ; she slightly answered his bow, but her colour rose, and she moved away, quite sure in her own mind that she saw plenty of listeners there, who would carry about the room the fullest particulars of the mistake, and with embellishments not at all displeasing to herself.

If Grace could have been eclipsed by any one to-night, the three Misses Staunton would have done it. They were fine showy girls in themselves, and always dressed with such magnificence that they made a sensation wherever they appeared ; so that party-givers were glad to invite them, and at last they got accustomed to look upon themselves as the chief stars of every assembly they attended. But to-night—when they found themselves, as usual, gathered round Grace, amusing her with the chit-chat and scandal of

the annual Leatham ball which had just taken place, they bit their lips with vexation as they looked at each other, and saw their magnificent pale pink satins growing pallid and washy beside the deep rich glow of hers. But the eldest—who, unlike her sisters, had not come with any view to conquest,—did not trouble herself about their ill-concealed jealousy; she began her scrutiny of Winny; who had unconsciously dashed certain hopes, very faint ones to be sure, that had been cherished by Miss Staunton in her heart of hearts. The sisters finding themselves in this agreeable state of mind, made, for the rest of the evening a sort of exclusive circle for themselves and their own peculiar friends at one end of the drawing-room; thither they retired at the close of every dance to vent their spleen in satirical criticisms on every one not belonging to the set. The amiable society was joined by many, who—having moved in a different sphere where they were made much of—felt themselves not appreciated here. Among these were Mr. and Mrs. Rintle, and their daughter, to whom poor Winny, quite inadvertently, had given mortal offence.

It was when Grace was talking to a stiff pompous-looking old gentleman, that Winny, touching her arm, had said looking towards one of the dancers,—a pale and somewhat affected-looking girl,

“Grace—who is that?”

“Miss Rintle,” Grace answered quickly, again turning to her companion.

“Poor girl!” continued Winny. “Surely such a delicate, sickly-looking thing, ought to be in bed instead of being decked out in tarlatan, to dance away

what little strength she has. Is there no one to care for her—to teach her better ? ”

The old gentleman stood a minute in front of Winny, looking down upon her with so peculiar an expression, that she felt very much inclined to laugh. When he strutted away, and she saw him whispering to a stout lady in the Staunton circle, she put up her fan, and said to Grace, with a roguish smile, for she felt she was going to be satirical for once,

“ Who is he ? ” Tell me his name ? ”

“ Mr. Rintle. ”

“ What, the father of—? ”

“ Yes, of that poor sickly girl, ‘ who can’t take care of herself, and has no one to be careful for her ; ’ ” answered Grace, with a still more malicious smile in return.

But Winny grew serious instantly ; and taking her place at the dining-room door waited for the quadrille to end, when she had some vague notion of way-laying Miss Rintle, and saying or doing something to please her before she encountered her father. Mr. Dell could not think what was the matter with her as he watched her gliding round the dancers, looking, with her white dress and pale anxious face among their splendid habiliments, like a delicate spring blossom blown among the gorgeous summer flowers. Unfortunately Miss Rintle was dancing with one of the Staunton set, who bore her off under Winny’s very eyes to their end of the room, so she retired to Grace’s side in despair.

After the business of supper was over, and the dancers had exhausted what strength they had gained

from it, time seemed to drag a little. Nearly everybody had joined the Staunton set but Mr. Rudyard, and the curate and his family, and a sprinkling of elderly ladies and gentlemen, looking rather sleepy and cross.

Of course Mrs. Addersley had not once moved from her arm-chair in the corner, where she had been holding a little court of her own; the flash, whenever she lifted her swan's-down wrapper, of the chains and jewels with which her dress was covered, attracted many whom her idle complaints, and not over refined expressions, would have otherwise repelled.

About this time, Winny—forgetting her dread responsibilities—had found a little peace of mind in talking to Mrs. Mylde the curate's wife about preserves and babies; while Mr. Dell, Sir George, and Mr. Rudyard, disputed with one another over politics on the hearth-rug. As for Grace she seemed to grow more and more radiant every hour. It made Mr. Dell smile to see how his friend Mr. Payne Croft (the gentleman who had mistaken Grace for the bride, and who had the fame of a confirmed woman-hater,) was fascinated by the ease with which she conversed on subjects seldom grasped by a woman's intellect. Mr. Croft's eye caught one of those smiles, and joining the politicians on the rug, he said,—

“I was just asking Miss Addersley for some music. Does Mrs. Dell sing?”

“Sing?” cried Winny, gaily, and coming up to them—“I often wonder how I should live without singing.”

“Come, then,” Grace said, seating herself at the

piano. “I will play for you. What will you sing? This?” And she turned over the leaves of some music.

Winnie drew back.

“What do you mean, Grace? You know I can’t sing to music,” she whispered over Grace’s shoulder.

“Nonsense,” Grace answered in the same tone. “You will find it just as easy. Sing as you would without music, and I’ll keep you right.” Grace then struck a few notes of a song which Winnie but imperfectly knew. She drew back, and was going to refuse, when she became conscious of a sudden movement in the room, and turning her head she beheld the whole Staunton set coming in a phalanx towards the piano. What was she to do?—she asked herself. Would *he* like her to say before all those people that she could not sing to music? Besides, she might be able to do it—with Grace’s help. Grace said she would. Better try, at all events. So she began—tremulously—even the very words she felt uncertain of—and directly she heard her own shivering voice breaking upon the cruel silence, the blood rushed to her face—she felt she could not go on. She grasped the edge of the piano, and making a great effort to speak calmly—said with a faint smile,—

“No, I cannot manage it—I never sang to music. You sing it, Grace.”

“Do you really wish me to do so?” asked Grace, in a tone only audible to Winnie.

“Yes—dear Grace—anything to take their eyes off me”—she whispered back again; then sinking down upon a chair near the piano, she closed her lips tightly, to keep down the hysterical feeling in her throat.

The Stauntons tittered behind their fans; and exchanged remarks till the first two or three notes of Grace's voice held every breath suppressed.

Even Mr. Dell, who, feeling Winny's break down almost as acutely as herself, had crossed over, and was leaning on her chair, soon found himself forgetting, with Winny, everything but that voice which was filling the rooms, and floating out into the quiet night.

It is true he had faintly heard her in the distance, from time to time, practising in her own room; but she had never sang to him, and till now he had had no conception of the power and beauty of her voice.

When she had finished, the Misses Staunton, who had the mortification of hearing Grace enthusiastically applauded by their own special admirers and followers, rose to depart. One of them, the youngest, had lost her roll of music, and her two sisters went to seek it in an alcove at the end of the room, where Mr. Staunton was quietly enjoying Grace's singing. Winny fancied she had seen the music on a table near the alcove, and went to look for it there. While searching among the sofa-cushions and books, she heard Miss Staunton's satirical voice in the alcove.

"O certainly, papa, certainly," she was saying, with her sarcastic stress upon almost every word, "I know many may think her a most engaging young person, for a farmer's daughter; but what I say is, that if Mr. Dell had not more respect for his own family in making such an alliance so public, he might have had better taste than to bring *us* in contact,—to place *us* on the footing of guests to a--a--person of her education and manners, to say nothing of her station in life."

"Poor thing!" sneered her sister, "I wonder how she'll manage when she's hailed by the Leatham market women as acquaintances."

"Perhaps we have had some of them here. But as regards Mr. Dell, I quite disagree with you, Clara; I think he is very much to be pitied. Consider his position to-night. What must he have felt at all her blunders, and absurd mistakes? Did you hear those low remarks of hers about Miss Rintle?"

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Staunton a little impatiently; "there is no doubt but that Mr. Dell has made a marriage that is likely to prove most disastrous to his prospects here." And he rose to put an end to the conversation, which he did not care to have carried on under his neighbour's very roof.

Winnie heard all this,—with her eyes fixed on the wall before her, supporting herself with one hand by holding the table, while the other was pressed tightly to her heart: she felt then the throbs of its first great trouble.

It was strange how differently the words she had heard affected her, to what they would have affected any other person. She felt no anger for the speakers; not because she was too good to feel anger, but simply because they did not sting: she felt them only as an overwhelming confirmation of a vague dread that had been growing up in her heart for the last few hours. Suddenly, after standing a moment—as if stunned—she closed her eyes and tried to think. What was she doing now—listening? Yes, she must go away. They must not see her there. She tried to walk steadily down the long room, but directly she turned

a giddiness came over her, and she beheld all things as in a kind of whirling maze. She had vague untangible impressions of chandeliers and mirrors; of old gentlemen walking about tightening their gloves, and looking down at their hands, as if they didn't exactly know what to do with them, and of young gentlemen bending over chairs, with young ladies looking up in their faces, talking wearily of country parties, and longing for the London season; of very young girls whose friends were beginning to take them out a little that they might learn how to stare strangers in the face without shrinking, before they went to town,—and of sleepy mammas making signs to the young folks that they wished to depart, but which signs seemed never properly to reach their destination; these, and everything else in the room, swam in a confused crowd before Winny's eyes: a painful human phantasmagoria which would not be fixed and stable under any effort she could make. But her hand was taken and drawn through an arm—she looked up—and saw her husband's face as she had never seen it before—stern and pale.

“Winny, you shall stay here no longer; this is my fault. Miss Staunton is right. I *should* have been more careful as to those I invited to meet you.”

She drew back and shook her head, her pallid lips moving as if she were trying to speak. She wanted to say, “No, I must wait till they are gone, or it will make matters worse.” But he did not understand her,—he thought by her cold silent gestures that her heart turned against him as the cause of its pain.

Presently the Misses Staunton, following their father,

issued from the alcove, and sailed majestically past without perceiving them. Taking up the roll of music Winny went after one of the ladies—her husband watching her anxiously.

“Is not this your sister’s music, Miss Staunton?”

Mr. Dell listened; could that be her voice? It was so unlike, he would hardly have believed it, but for the outstretched hand with the roll.

Miss Staunton turned—she knew where Mrs. Dell had been for the music, and blushed with genuine shame beneath the sweet mournful gaze of those eyes that were fixed upon her now.

Every one made a move to depart. Winny went about speaking a few words, in the same constrained tones which had so struck Mr. Dell, to everybody whom she fancied had been at all neglected. When the Rintles went out she followed them, and presently joined them in the hall; and going up to Miss Rintle, who was drawing on a thin cashmere shawl, she threw over her shoulders a warm and elegant opera cloak, saying—

“Mr. Rintle, please let her wear this. I was serious when I said she was delicate, I was indeed. It will make me very uncomfortable if she goes home without it.”

Mrs. Rintle was already in the carriage. Mr. Rintle bowed stiffly while holding out his arm for his daughter to take. She at first bridled up; then catching a glimpse of the cloak, with its handsome jewelled clasp, she looked at Winny, thought of all the exaggerations with which she had told the story of her insult, and, bursting into tears, made a con-

vulsive movement to undo the fastenings. Winny took her hand, pressed it, and pushed her into the carriage; which after Mr. Rintle had followed drove off, leaving her there alone.

Mr. Dell was not surprised when he found his wife did not return to the drawing-room; he only longed for the time when his two remaining visitors, his uncle and Mr. Croft, should retire for the night, that he might seek her.

But they chatted on, and he grew impatient, and at last determined to seek his wife, and return, when he met Grace, just outside the door. She arrested his footsteps.

“Cousin, let me go to her first—I have not had a moment lately to speak to her. I know you have not been deceived by the mask I have worn to-night; but she may be.”

He pressed his cousin’s hand with a thankful look, as he replied—

“Dear Grace—our warmest friendship can never show you how we have appreciated your efforts. Go to her if you wish, but don’t think for one moment she has not understood them as well as myself. Tell her I am trying to get Sir George and Mr. Croft to end their discussion.”

She stood and watched him till he disappeared in the gloom of the passage leading to his favourite antique room, adjoining the study, whither he went to fetch some pamphlet he had been lately reading, and which had been adverted to, in the discussion with Sir George.

“Our friendship!” echoed Grace, in an undertone

of bitterness, while her form dilated, and her eyes flashed beneath the meeting brows. "Our friendship!" But again the cold indescribable light—hardly to be called a smile—flitted across the gloom of her countenance, and her thin lips moved with a low stifled "Hush! Wait!" She then threw on her cloak, and descended the stairs in search of Winny.

Mr. Dell started, as, opening the door of the old room, a few seconds later, he saw Winny seated in the great chair—his own—in the centre of the window. The moonlight was full upon her face; and he saw she was weeping, though her eyes were closed.

"Winny—you are pained—you think I should have foreseen this?"

She stopped him:

"I, pained! Do you think I could have heard I had brought trouble upon you, without being pained?"

"Winny, you do not surely believe such gossip has had any effect upon me."

"Yes I do—I know it—I saw how pale you were—you almost trembled when you took my hand."

"Well then, I answer you in your own way, and with equal truth. Do you think I was not pained to see I had brought on you such remarks? Surely, Winny, you do not suppose I had any other feeling than scorn—as regards their meaning?"

"Still," rejoined Winny, mournfully shaking her head, "what they said was true; I have been dreaming strangely. Picturing to myself an ideal

world—which I alone, it seems, was silly enough to inhabit. Well, I am awakened now. I am disenchanting.” Again Mr. Dell felt the hot tears on his hand, upon which she had laid her cheek. He began now to understand the intense feeling of depression with which his wife received this her first bitter experience of the world. She came to meet it with a glad frank confidence, full of love, full of the sense of the wondrous affluence of life, the choicest blessings of which seemed to have fallen to her. She had felt so grateful for it all that she wanted to do something to express her happiness—and to make those she met the recipients of the overflow of her glad emotion. She had not thought—noticeably—of her defective education, had not much weighed her unfamiliarity with the society in which she would be henceforth called upon to move. Why should she? They were men and women. They could doubtless teach her much by their converse and behaviour that she would gladly learn; they might possibly glean something in return from the fresh, happy spirit, that advanced so hopefully to meet them. Alas, she did not know what that word “society” meant; that it had no open arms for anything so artless and candid as she was; no appreciation for aught that did not come to it stamped with some definite mint-mark previously; no care, in short, for anything or anybody, except so far as he, she, or they, might help to get up a little excitement for the said poor, weary, helpless society’s relief or amusement. How thoroughly hollow, heartless, cruel and unjust it can be in its worst moods—how much it is often dependent for these moods, and for its

opinions, upon the most contemptible of its members,—all this she had not even dreamed of as possible: and she stood appalled, heart-sick, now, at the discovery of the actual truth,—when she connected with it the equally painful fact, that it was necessary for her husband's sake that she should become one of that society, study its ways, win its approbation, colour her whole existence with its hues.

“Well,” she continued, in a voice of inexpressible sadness, “what must we do? I have sat here thinking a long time, and nothing comes to me—but the wish that we had never seen each other.”

“Winnie!” cried Mr. Dell, at once shocked and displeased, “you did not wish that?”

“Yes I did, I do. When I was standing in the porch, after those people had gone, I longed—oh I can't tell you what a longing I had to see my dear father and mother—to take off this ring and give it back to you, and leave these splendid scenes, where my breath seems only to be like a poison; and to be once again among the humble scenes of my infancy. Oh,” she cried, bursting into a passion of tears, “what will become of me, if—if—”

“If what, Winnie?”

“If I cannot do for you that which your friends expect—if I am to feel through life that I have destroyed your prospects—if I have to live, not in the hope and happiness of pleasing you, but in the constant dread of offending or humiliating you!”

“Winnie, do you remember the line in Hamlet, which you stopped at, and made me repeat, when I was reading to you, and which you yourself so often and

lovingly iterated afterwards, as though it were an air you could not get out of your soul :

‘ Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh ;’

Do you remember it ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ You, my own Winny, are those bells just now ; and very naughty, unreasonably, and unjustly you talk in your jangled state. Pray Madam,—for I am going to be very angry with you,—do you know that in spite of all these little troubles you have magnified so portentously, there was an opinion in that room curiously opposed, I have no doubt, to all that reached you ? ”

As Winny did not, perhaps would not, show curiosity, he proceeded :—

“ An opinion, let me tell you, that I think worthy of attention. Well, hear it, and then judge. It ran thus : there was not in the whole assembly one woman so truly sweet in her person, or so fresh and vigorous in her mind, as my wife ; one woman who really knew so much as you know, or who was destined probably to exercise so much social influence. Do you know, I ask, that there was such an opinion deliberately formed in yonder rooms ? ”

“ No—no—don’t jest with me, as they did who said so.”

“ On my honour I do not.”

“ Whose opinion, then, was it ? ”

“ Mine.”

What radiance was it that suddenly illumined the sad countenance, and made the tears glitter in the soft.

blue eyes, as they turned, and looked on his manly, sympathetic, and half-smiling face?—a radiance that went on growing and brightening, and silvering, like some fair cloud under the rays of the moon, when the glorious luminary is being rapidly freed from a coil of envious shadows? Thus Winny's face brightened at last into a smile, sweet but pale: and then colour came, and the smile grew of a rosy hue, though timorous and changeable, as doubting the fact or propriety of its own existence; until at last broke forth a low laugh—delicious music to Mr. Dell's ears—but there she stopped, for the tears would not be restrained so suddenly—they had not gathered so bountifully for nothing, they would forth, but they were happy ones; and they bathed his face too, as the arms were raised, and clasped about his neck, and the tender, bird-like form was pressed to the sheltering breast. After a while she murmured,—

“Oh do not let the world part us, whatever God may do.”

“The world, Winny! Why, does not my own stupid, silly little wife see that I feel for it the utmost contempt? That I would not sacrifice one bit of genuine reality to save its soul alive? But then, you know, 'tis such a poor soul to save; so don't think me unchristian. What! I sacrifice you for that! Why, I would not sacrifice even my own mere tastes and fancies in such a cause, unless some new spirit, with a savour of health in it, came over this said society! No—no; I play with the world as it plays with me: pleasing myself in my own way, and trying once in a season (as to-night) to please it in its way;

but I never did get on well in the process, and I am delighted to see you can't much help me."

"Aye, but what is to be done? No more delusions, however sweet. You may calm me easily now; but not when I get to myself alone, unless you do it honestly, thoroughly. Mind that. I don't think I should so much fear the world, if I must buckle armour on. But oh, I wanted to love it—to be loved by it. What is now to be done?"

"Nothing—but smile at the world's folly; and your own, for being moved by it."

"O yes, there is. I will not consent knowingly to shame you. That which your wife ought to do, I must do—or—"

"Well, here is my advice; take it just for what it is worth. Do that which you feel requisite in the way of preparation to secure your own ease and comfort of mind, when you may have occasion to go into the world; and when you have done so, don't give a second thought to the subject. Remain yourself in every essential, or, I warn you, I shall love you less—however dearly. You will be surprised some day to find that society is just as cowardly as it is conventional; and that when once you have fulfilled its ordinary routine conditions, you may be as original, as individual, as you please, if only you don't trouble yourself to ask whether society does or does not approve. Give society nothing to do in judging of you, and it is wonderful how well it will do it."

Winnie laughed. Mr. Dell continued,—

"You know what Grace and I told you about Mrs. Cairn?"



"Ah yes: and now I see it all, what you and Grace intended, when you mentioned her name before. You wished to spare me possible mortifications, that I was too much self-engrossed to be apprehensive of. You wanted to make me know, in a quiet, loving way, how much I was ignorant of—you, and dear Grace. Ah, here she is."

"Here *she* is, indeed!" said Grace, laughingly, as she entered. "Why, Winny, I've been searching all your favourite haunts in the house for you."

"Grace, husband," Winny said, standing between them, and taking a hand of each, "I have found you both out. Well, do now what you were going to do for me. Mrs. Cairn will not have such a thankless pupil in me as she might have done before to-night. They said I learnt quickly at school what little I did learn; but then I disliked it because I saw no use in it—but now—"

She clasped their hands and raised her head—the eyes half shutting as she did so,—while the strength of will playing about the muscles of the sweet quivering mouth, and shining out upon the noble white brow, staggered even Grace Addersley. She began to respect her mortal enemy. Winny then spoke in low measured accents,—

"But now, if, striving with all my heart and soul and strength, I *can* conquer, I *will*."


CHAPTER XIII.

SAD DOINGS OF JOHN SHORT.

GOING one morning into the kitchen when no one expected her, Mrs. Dell came suddenly upon Meggy and Cook in a very unusual attitude towards each other. Something was evidently wrong, yet it was not easy to guess what. Both were silent, and neither was inclined to be the first to speak. That was not surprising as regards Meggy: it was very strange, however, as respected Cook. Mrs. Dell glanced from face to face. For once Meggy looked, she thought, as though the least possible shade of obstinacy—not to say defiance, had crept into her countenance, which, however, was carefully turned away. Cook, on the other hand, red, puzzled, and indignant, seemed to be feeling the growing heat and smoke of an incipient quarrel, which would neither go on nor go off. Mrs. Dell dashed in, hoping to create a diversion—

“Meggy, you’ve done your work, why don’t you go out a bit? Don’t you care about going out? Didn’t you like your last walk?”

This was but a simple question, certainly; but simple questions have done a good deal of mischief in their time, and the present was a case in point—only



it was not Meggy who was to be violently affected by it, but Cook. Now Cook had not, on the whole, a good temper; and if Mrs. Dell had said to her "the patties were indifferent the other night, hadn't you better get Mrs. Staunton's cook to show you how she manages hers?" or, "Cook, Mr. Dell says we must cut down expenses—would you mind a reduction of your wages?" or, yet again, "Cook, they tell me you were good-looking in your young days, was that so?"—had Mrs. Dell asked her any such questions, (and she could have found it very possible, in thought at least, to have done so, for the malicious enjoyment of the fun,) she would have expected an explosion, and been prepared to appreciate it accordingly. But now, when she had put only this simple question to Meggy, she was startled at the sudden vehemence of Cook's gesture and voice; and though, when Cook saw the look of grave dignity she had called forth, she paused, and checked herself, and tidied herself a bit mentally, and smoothed herself down before she ventured to speak, yet she could scarcely conceal her rage even then at the question poor Mrs. Dell had unwittingly asked.

"Last walk indeed! Lor, ma'am, don't you know she went and lost herself, out and out, and frightened me out of my senses, and come home in a pretty pickle? Pray don't talk o' sending of her agin; the very mention of it brings on them rompins in her head, and no wonder. It was a fright for her, ma'am, she won't forget in a hurry. I know I wouldn't answer for her head, ma'am, if she got such another, and that's a bit o' my mind."

"Lost herself?" repeated Mrs. Dell, vainly trying

to discover any traces in Meggy's face of the awful terrors of the occasion referred to. "How was she found, then?"

"O, I asked John Short to look about him when he went home that Monday night, and knowin' what a fright I were in he were good enough to pick her up and bring her home. There, look at her, ma'am! I told you she couldn't bear talk of it. Catch me a lettin' her go trapesin out agin if I knows it!"

"O, she will manage better next time," observed Mrs. Dell; "but what's the matter with her now?" Meggy's face was in eclipse once more behind her apron; and her frame was seized either with one of those convulsive gasps which denoted going off, or with something so like that, in its partially veiled effects, that it was hard to perceive the difference.

"What's the matter with her, ma'am?" repeated Cook, growing redder and hotter, and more indignant every instant, and bearing with one hand heavily down upon poor Meggy's shoulder, while the other was spread out on the girl's back preparatory to the usual operation of 'bringing to'—"what's the matter, ma'am? O, it's that fine Monday'scursion. I expect she'll bear the shakes on it too, ma'am, till the end of her blessed days, that I do. You can't speak on it, but off she goes, so."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Dell, "what can be the reason?"

"O, it don't take many fools to tell that," answered Cook, as she ceased belabouring Meggy's back, and tried to set her up in the chair, and to pull the apron from her face, which somehow Meggy held uncon-

monly tight. "Sit up, do, and leave a suffocatin' o' yourself, will you? Why, it's just this, ma'am—"

"But sit down, Cook," interposed Mrs. Dell, "you should rest when you can," and Cook gladly did so, for she was heavy, and found much standing arduous; but she kept the while a fiery eye upon Meggy as she continued: "John Short's a bin a talkin' nonsense to her, ma'am. You'd think now as you *might* trust a man so sparin' o' breath, but, Lor bless you!" and there Cook shrugged her shoulders: language didn't suffice to express the disgust she felt.

"What did he say, Meggy?" inquired Mrs. Dell, looking with mingled pity and mirth upon the exhaustion evinced by the girl in the state of "comin' to."

"Now, then, can't you answer?" cried Cook, folding her arms, and preparing to get at last, under cover of Mrs. Dell, the truth that she had vainly striven to extract from Meggy by her own independent action. Meggy made no answer, but her manner showed she was perfectly conscious of her position. Presently she began to roll up her white apron in her trembling red hands, much to the annoyance of Cook, whose fingers itched to be at her, but who refrained from interrupting the confession she had determined to extort. So she watched her, grimly silent, with a kind of stony patience, until Meggy found a new relief in squeezing her starched apron up in her hands as if wringing imaginary water from it, when Cook burst in with—

"Let that alone, do, and answer your missus, you miserable ditherin' shakin' thing, you! Do you hear? What did John Short tell you that set your head a going faster nor ever?"

“Mum—mum—must I?” half-sobbed, half-lisped Meggy, having recourse to the screen of her hands, now that the apron was denied to her.

“O certainly you must,” said her mistress laughing. “Come, what was it?”

“O ma’am, he said that—that—that I wasn’t so bad-looking after all as Cook made out!—But it wasn’t my fault, ma’am, it wasn’t indeed! That’s all, ma’am; and I couldn’t help it, and I—” and there Meggy, regardless of Cook’s look of utter contempt, snatched up the forbidden apron, and ran off, whether crying or laughing Mrs. Dell could not make out, into the dairy.

“Well,” said Cook, leaning back in her chair, and contemplating the dairy door in the distance with a kind of forced benevolence, “so that’s it, is it? Well, I thought it were somethin’ o’ the kind. Can’t deceive me. I wanted to bring her out. Why, ma’am, afore that day the gal ud no more a thought o’ lookin’ in a glass than Rebecca yonder ud think a going a week without; and now, ma’am, I never goes upstairs but what I finds her a grinnin’ at her sweet wisage, that ‘ain’t so bad as Cook makes out!’ The young hussey! So that’s it, is it? Well, I’ll see how she goes out agin in a hurry, or how I sends John Short to look after her. But I’ll have a talk with John, ma’am! He won’t come here, perhaps, for a week or two to come. Oh, I know him! But I paid him a visit at Leatham a while ago, and I’ll pay him another soon. The gal sha’n’t go to ruin under my very nose; trust me, ma’am, for that.”

“Well, but, Cook,” remonstrated Mrs. Dell, “don’t

go too fast. If he has only said thus much to Meggy it would be hard to—”

“ I knows John Short, ma’am—you don’t. I beg your pardon, ma’am, but when I sees that poor innocent—and he a sly, deceitful fellow, as never lets you know his right mind, but lets your best days go while he’s a playin’ fast and loose with you—” here Cook was so struck with the expression of her mistress’s face, at once penetrating and arch, that she stopped in some confusion and consciousness, which was not lessened when Mrs. Dell remarked,

“ O, I can take your word for it, Cook, John Short is a dangerous man ;” and before Cook could reply, her mistress was gone ; and before she reached the end of the corridor Cook could hear her with difficulty stifling her laughter, and at last, while pretending to stumble over one of the pups, give way to a clear, bright, ringing, and most contagious mirth, that penetrated to every part of the mansion. Cook listened, and set her face grimly. It didn’t matter, she thought. Nothing mattered just then. Presently though she said—

“ This day fortnight look for me at Leatham, John Short, if you don’t come here afore !” That was the only comment Cook made ; and there was a stolid determination about the accompanying look that boded ill for poor John’s peace on the threatened day.

CHAPTER XIV.

MRS. CAIRN AT HOME ONCE MORE.

MRS. CAIRN was better the day after her interview with her son, as Jean had anticipated she would be. The doctor grew quite cheerful and sanguine over the case; Archy might go away in full satisfaction that the danger was over. But, nevertheless, Archy did not go, for he saw with inexpressible gladness that his mother did not want him to go—not yet. She said little, and did not trust herself even to look at him very often, or to dwell long when she did look; but there was an unmistakeable tenderness exhibited towards him that told how the heart of the proud, stern, strong woman had been controlled and kept down while she remained in the conviction of his utter unworthiness; and how, under the new hope, it was rebelling against all such control, and re-asserting the ties of blood and maternity. Ah! yes, that returning faith in him was everything to her—and to him! And how shall I describe Archy's behaviour during the days of convalescence? How he hung upon her glances, anticipated her every wish, supported her with arm so gently yet firmly entwined round the waist if she wished but to move a step or two; drew the shawl about her if she gave the

slightest quiver that might imply cold? And when one morning he persuaded her to go out in a steam-boat upon the Medway, never surely did lover watch with more earnest gaze the slightest change of the dear countenance than did Archy, as he sat upon a coil of ropes at her feet.

And Jean!—poor Jean, I wonder what she felt to see him thus who had once been esteemed her lover, and was supposed to have intended to become her husband? She knew that she was moving for the time in a charmed atmosphere, where love was predominant, but not the love that had enthralled her imagination; that Archy’s soft undertones, and his little genial familiarities, and his constant solicitude for her comfort and welfare, were only natural manifestations of his new state of being: overflowings from the great abundance of his affection, now that the hidden fountains were set free. And yet at times she was alike frightened and pained to discover that she was again listening to him as she had once before listened; that insidious suggestions were creeping into her ear—mingling among her thoughts—stirring the deepest recesses of her heart, and whispering, “Jean, it was *you* he was looking at then, with that long inquiring gaze;”—“Jean, it was *you* who were just then occupying his secret thoughts, for did he not again and again dwell on and recur to the same topic, while he questioned you about occurrences in his absence!”—“Ah! Jean, it was not you alone who lost control over the tell-tale cheek; for the kindling blood on *his* face responded to that of yours when certain dangerous references to old times crossed and startled the

conversation." And then Jean's soul, somehow, could not answer these whispers with her usual clearness of vision ; but began to seek for explanations and artificial defences against she knew not what. "Yces," she said to herself, "his mother has been talking to him, and he thinks, perhaps, he ought to be very kind to me, and considerate, and grateful—yes, even grateful, perhaps—for what I have done. Nay, possibly he thinks he ought to fulfil the old engagement, and—" there the vision passed, with all its illusions, and Jean stood once more alone beneath the cruel light of despair—hopeless, but determined—recognising all her hopeless self ; and then the harshness returned to her voice, and the look of painful constraint to her face ; and no one knew wherefore. Archy wondered and was troubled, but remained silent, quite silent.

At last they were able to return home. And Mrs. Cairn sunk with a deep sigh of relief into the old arm-chair, and seemed to say, without words, as she looked yearningly round upon the little place where she had lived so long, and where her dear and honoured husband had died, "Never more to leave thee again ! Never—never more !" And Jean slipped quietly in to Bletchworth the same evening, and told the story of their adventures to Grace, who listened as one rapt ; and Grace, in return, gave Jean the expected promise that everything she could do to promote the interests of Mrs. Cairn and her son, she would do. She inquired when Mr. Archibald would come, and as Jean answered "to-morrow morning," she walked away, and stood looking across under the cedars towards Grey Ghost Walk so long, that Jean thought

she would leave her to her thoughts, and pay her respects to Mrs. Dell, but her movement was arrested—

“Jean!”

“Yes, miss?”

“It seems to me that the future fate of your lover—”

“Oh! Miss Addersley, do not, please do not ever use that word again; he is no lover of mine.” But Jean could say no more;—the face which had flushed into sudden scarlet had now almost as suddenly changed to the pallor of death.

“I am really, then, to understand, that you do not care anything about him; or, what to a woman of spirit means nearly the same thing, that he cares nothing about you.”

“We are friends, Miss Addersley, and can never be anything more,” said Jean, with a kind of reproachful dignity of tone; for though she did not exactly like to resent this painful inquisition, or to complain of the torturing rack to which she was being subjected, yet she felt that she might presently be compelled to do both.

“Ah, well, Jean, you may trust me; I understand now, and will keep your secret. So, to recur to what I wanted to say. Mr. Archibald's future fate, it seems to me, depends very much upon the reception Mr. Dell gives him.”

“Oh, it does indeed.”

“Well, now, can't we ladies—myself and Mrs. Dell—aid him a little?”

“How, if you please?”

“Why, men are apt to be hard and logical, and to resist everything that can stir their sympathies till they have first satisfied their colder judgments; and yet—granted for a moment that Mr. Archibald’s story prove to be truthfulness itself—he may falter and lose courage in so painful a position; and the more so, I think, because he will expect in Mr. Dell half a judge, half a friend, and will get confused at times as to which aspect is before him.”

“Ah, yes, Miss Addersley; that is just what I should expect.”

“Well, now, suppose I and Mrs. Dell were both present? He has my sympathies already; and his very sensitiveness and falterings—if they should show themselves—would touch Mrs. Dell’s womanly heart; and I need not tell you that to win the wife here is to go a long way towards winning the husband.”

“Yes, but—”

“But what?”

“Mr. Archibald is—I am sure of it—confident of his own case, and would wish to appeal to Mr. Dell’s judgment, and not to his feelings.”

“Jean, forgive my question, but do you know that the punishment he has been subjected to is one never inflicted, so far as I have heard, on any but men who are esteemed—really I don’t like to use the word to you—infamous?”

Jean pressed her hand upon her brow as she answered, “O yes, I guessed as much from what I saw.”

“Then do you not perceive what an uphill fight he has to maintain? His own mother, you tell me,

was turned against him and convinced by the mere spectacle, without a word.”

Jean’s lips moved, but she could not speak. She saw clearer than she had ever before seen, how fearful were the obstacles in Archy’s path ; and she turned to Grace, piteously appealing, by her looks, for help.

“ Well, do you now better understand what I meant ? ”

“ Oh yes, thank you.”

“ Well, then, can’t you manage so to prepare Mr. Archibald, that he will be willing and desirous to speak in our presence, if circumstances appear to be favourable to his doing so ? ”

“ May I say that you decidedly think he should do so, even for his mother’s sake ? ”

“ Yes—if you don’t directly connect me any further in the matter. That would not be pleasant. I speak, in fact, Jean, chiefly on account of my interest in you. I have never treated you as a servant, you know.”

“ I am very grateful, Miss Addersley, believe me.”

“ Quick then. I will spare you yet another evening to add to the many of your long absence. Do what you can to prepare him for to-morrow. You may depend upon my good offices. Only, Jean, continue—what you have hitherto always been—frank with me. There, that’ll do. Do you want any money ? No ? Well, draw some whenever you do. Good night, Jean.”

* * * *

And how was Archy feeling as the period drew nigh for that trial upon which hung everything that could make the world and life worth possessing ? If

he did rely, as Jean said he did, upon appealing simply to Mr. Dell's judgment, it is very certain that the host of tumultuous thoughts that kept pressing in upon him, addressed themselves not to *his* judgment, but to his feelings, which were little able to answer them. A great shadow seemed to have risen out of the earth; and though forgotten for a time during his anxiety for his mother, and in consequence of the many emotions that thence arose, he saw with increasing alarm the portentous darkness grow and grow, and shut out one object after another—flowers, trees, skies, stars; and still it seemed to darken, and to thicken, and to threaten, till he felt as one stifled, and ready to cry out in his terror and despair, "O God, help me, that I escape!"

His mother was safe once more and at home—but for how long? If Mr. Dell should hesitate in the least, there would need no more to convince Mrs. Cairn that her worst apprehensions had been true; and Archy knew her too well to dream of there being the remotest possibility of a second time modifying an unfavourable judgment. Never was sentence passed by a judge in high and solemn assembly, more fatal than would be that word from Mr. Dell, which should first convey to Mrs. Cairn's mind the idea "he disbelieves my son's story."

It was while his soul was thus secretly tossing about upon such stormy and alarming speculations, that Jean unexpectedly returned from the Hall, and said to him,

"Well, you will find one friend to-morrow."

"And that is—?"

"Miss Addersley;" and then Jean told him the substance of what had passed, and with so much more instinctive tact and delicacy towards him than Grace had succeeded in infusing into the conversation with herself, that Archy saw nothing but the kindly, graceful act of the lady, who thus stretched out a friendly and sympathising hand towards him; and he felt so glad, so grateful, so relieved in every way, that he could have worshipped her as an unseen, but religiously-believed-in goddess, suddenly descended from the skies for his special comfort and protection.

Archy's character was complex, and yet not difficult to understand. His instincts were good, but his judgment wavering, if not exactly weak. He desired well, but could not bring his will to the level of his desire. His principles were admirable, but seldom got time for any useful evolution, so constantly and so rapidly did his impulses carry him off out of their range and control. His was a loving, refined, and sensuous nature, akin to the artist's and the poet's in temperament, but utterly lacking their creative power, or the native strength that must underlie, as a base, their work. He lacked weight and balance; and so remained, as yet (for, be it remembered, he was very young), a mere creature of circumstance, laughing in all sunshine, depressed in all periods of shade.

As he listened to Jean, one of his rapid changes of feeling came over him.

He began, in thought, to ask himself wonderingly, as to the personality of this new divinity; and was framing a question or two to put to Jean, but that

was only a momentary impulse. "Ask Jean?" thought he, "no, no!" and he dismissed the idea with a natural and manly delicacy, and turned with a radiant face, saying,

"O Jean, you have comforted me more than I can tell you. It may be weakness, but I was dreading this interview to-morrow. The relief from torturing thoughts that your and mother's kindnesses have given me of late must end I know. It has been indeed a blessed relief, Jean, but the necessary change now seems only the more awful. Mr. Dell was my playmate when we were boys, my friend in early manhood; and now, to meet him and to tell him, and to have to ask myself what is passing secretly in his breast as he listens—"

Archy stopped; and Jean saw the cold drops of perspiration oozing forth on his brow and his colourless face; and she would have spoken if she could, but she could not, and presently he went on. "Well, well, 'twill soon be over. If he is not changed, I shall certainly satisfy him. I will think no more till the morning and the hour arrive. Jean, I am glad you stay here to-night. I seem happier when you are by. Good night!"

Jean murmured something that was inaudible, and moved hastily away.

And so they parted for the night.

CHAPTER XV.

ARCHY LISTENS WHEN HE SHOULD NOT.

ARCHY, at waking next morning during high sunshine, leaped cheerily from bed, dressed, breakfasted before the others were up, then placed everything ready for their breakfast without the least noise or the least omission, and stepped forth. It was early, too early yet to present himself at the Hall. How sweet the dear old place looked, how fresh the air smelt! He would walk an hour or two away—visit his old haunts—ascend to Norman Mount, near and overlooking the Hall and commanding a fine expanse of country. He stopped to pick flowers from the hedge as he went along; and he paused inquiringly for some minutes looking up into an old oak, to see what had become of the two squirrels that a moment before had been playing round and round the trunk, as though unconscious of and untroubled by the ordinary laws of gravity.

Once even, he burst out into a fit of song, but he repressed it with a sense of vexation and impropriety; and then a moment after he thought, with pardonable satisfaction, "Well, that is not exactly the conduct of a guilty man, I suppose." But then he grew more serious. The mount was a high one, a hill indeed,

and was half wild, half cultivated ; with seats placed here and there at different elevations, each spot chosen by an exquisitely appreciative eye. Archy knew the mount belonged to Mr. Dell, and guessed it was he who had made these welcome additions to it. He would not pause till he reached the top ; and while he was looking about with a charmed gaze at the serene pastoral loveliness of the country, almost every object in which had a tale or a recollection for him, he was suddenly conscious of a voice near him. Very sweet it was, though too low for him to distinguish more than its tones. Cautiously he approached the bush-clad verge, where it went sheer down, for perhaps thirty or forty feet. Dividing the foliage gently, he saw on the ledge or terrace just below, a female figure, habited in one of those charming, yet simple costumes, often worn of late years by ladies, as a kind of undress for mornings—a dress of simple brown holland, trimmed with white, jacket the same, and a straw hat, which, for the moment, was laid aside, leaving the beautiful hair, as though not under due restraint for the day, to fall loosely about in its natural ringlets. But the face ! Archy thought he had never in his life seen one so spiritually beautiful. Who could it be ? Miss Addersley ? The incident and ideas of the previous evening had sent Archy's imagination so powerfully in that direction, he could not readily divest himself of their influence now. Or was it Mrs. Dell ? But that was not likely. Young married women do not steal thus into solitude, and more particularly in early September mornings. No, doubtless it was Miss Addersley. He could not, of

course, speak to her, stranger as he yet was. And he must not watch her, or listen. But he did both, as the youthful, graceful figure rose and wandered to and fro, strangely contemplative; now gazing on the ground, now off into the farthest distances of the delicately tinted sky, but always as in a continuity of thought, which never seemed to be absolutely broken by any passing incidents, no matter how much they interested her. Thus she saw a great black crow rise, and sail heavily along, a few yards from the ground, his shadow also passing along on the grass below, so that it was hardly possible to avoid the illusion that there were two birds moving in mystic harmony together. She saw—watched the double apparition to the remotest possible point of sight, gave a little sigh as it disappeared, but resumed her walk and her meditation, as though neither had been broken.

At last Archy thought he could hear her low murmuring tones shape themselves into rhythm; and, O, the delicious sense of music they brought him—meaningless though they necessarily were! Meaningless, did I say? They whispered to Archy's captivated imagination all that he had ever contrived to bind up into one word—heaven!

But after a while the tones became, unconsciously to the speaker, more loud and distinct; and he was able to discover that she was repeating verses to herself; not as a mere lover of verses repeats them, but as their creator, over and over again, as though testing every link of the structure, listening to every word to see if it gave forth the true ring of the Pactolian metal. Thus, what Archy could not make

out in one recitation, he gradually learned from others that followed. It would be cruel to blame him for listening; he did not know he was listening; his whole soul was engrossed by the sweet and novel phenomenon before him. And so he listened and listened until he had drunk in, like some magic draught, the words of what appeared to be intended as

A DIRGE.

EARTH, receive the flowers ye gave ;
 Kiss them, winds, until they die ;
 Write ye, spirits, o'er their grave,
 Here, a Poet's dear ones lie !

Daisy, type of many hearts,
 Trodden most by those who love thee ;
 Striving, as the foot departs,
 Still to smile on all above thee.

Harebells ringing, yet no wind :
 As some sprite, in puzzled doubt,
 Touching playfully—to find—
 Shakes the timorous music out.

Foxgloves, rich in summer dyes,
 Honeyed storehouse of the bee ;
 Now his prison, now his prize,
 Let the bulky spoiler free.

Wild-briar bloom, snatch'd not by foes,
 Sheathe thy infant-wounding thorn !
 Bud to bud, and rose to rose,
 Beauty dying, beauty born.

Hawthorn white, whose fragrant breath
 Echoes to the passer-by,
 All that Spring-time ever saith,
 All that Summer can reply

Earth, receive the flowers ye gave ;
Kiss them, winds, until they die ;
Write ye, spirits, o'er their grave,
Here, a Poet's dear ones lie ! *

Was the fair writer pleased with her verses ? Archy could scarcely say. But he could see she was wrapt in them, believed in them, received them as so many angel visitants to her own spirit, come to commune with it, and bless it before they went away to wander among mankind.

He could also see that there was now experienced a sense of one kind of work accomplished, and a new sense of quite other work to be thought about, taking its place ; for there was an entire change in the gestures and movements of that frame, which more and more bewitched Archy's eyes, as his stolen glances rested upon it thus unsuspected. The wandering curls were brought together and restrained in some fashion that Archy understood not, nor cared to inquire into—the result was enough,—and then the straw hat was put on, and little stray waifs were collected together, a handkerchief, and a note-book (unused this morning—the memory for once had done all), and some wild-flowers, and then there was just one loving, lingering look all round—the blue eyes passing over Archy's resting-place and covert in their circuit, but showing no consciousness that they there saw other eyes meeting them in silent adoration, and for the very sufficient reason that they did not see them ; and then there was a kind of hasty touching

* These verses have appeared in the *Athenæum*, among the poetical contributions which that paper occasionally publishes.

and smoothing of the dress, and a brushing off as it were of influences no longer to be indulged; and a taking on of a quiet, demure, business-like gait, inexpressibly *naïve* and touching to the sole observer, who knew, as well as if the figure had spoken them, the words which were in the mind, "Now then for the business of the day!"—and she was gone, disappearing round the corner of the little platform of earth, but not out of hearing, for Archy was listening again presently, as the voice broke forth, and this time into actual song, fresh and exhilarating as the carol of the birds—but, O, how different in their effect to Archy, who lay down upon the grass, motionless, that he might hear to the very last possible instant the sounds that so ravished him.

But he must waken from this strange day-dream. He must go to Mr. Dell. Was that indeed Miss Addersley? If not, who could it be? And then came the question, "Shall I have to tell such a story before her?" If a clap of thunder had suddenly burst over his head it would scarcely have wakened him more thoroughly than did that thought. If all the storms of heaven had been concentrated into one storm, and that had now opened its vials upon him, he could not have cowered in greater horror than he felt, as he hurried along to seek shelter or destruction, by learning the worst or the best at once.

CHAPTER XVI.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

WHEN Winny returned from her favourite retreat to the Hall, cosily hugging in her breast her little secret (and I fancy if she had known it was not a secret, poor Archy would have paid a penalty for his curiosity), she found Mr. Dell waiting, and watching for her, with a penetrating look upon his face that she understood, but did not choose to notice. So she was passing him in the porch, with her own side-raised glance and sweet smile, that said so much to him who knew their precious meaning, but he arrested her steps, and said,

“I can’t paint this morning. You make me get up too early. I can hardly realise the fact that I am up, and have had my breakfast, and that I ought to have done a full hour’s work. I don’t progress, do I? Can *you* give a better account of yourself, eh? If so, I suppose I must submit to all this gross tyranny. But come, the fruits! the fruits! I hunger and thirst for them this morning. My soul’s parched and dry. Come, Winny, no hypocrisy;—you are growing hardened now in scribbling, and can’t be allowed these little preliminary indulgences any longer. What have you written?”

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Look at my note-book? No, no, you shan't look; I forgot what I was saying. But I give you my word of honour I have written nothing."

"What, actually idled away the time?"

"Oh worse, far worse than that."

"How?"

"By making bad verses, that I had not the hardihood to commit to paper."

"Oh, indeed, we'll see to that. Come, begin."

And Winny prepared to consent—nay, it was sweet to find him thus eagerly seeking her consent. For she had grown to want her husband's acceptance and enjoyment of all her poetic labours, not because of the pleasure it gave her, sweet as that was—but because she did not feel she could have done anything worth the doing, as regarded other minds, if he did not approve. Other minds? Yes—Winny, like all true poets, loved poetry, first, for its own sake, and for all that it did in and for her own spirit; but secondly, for the power it gave over others; a power too exquisitely perfect in its nature, and too holy and far-reaching in its scope, to be lightly held or lightly used by any actual possessor. Winny dared not ask herself *why* she should have had such a power confided to her, and she trembled at the thought of a poet's responsibility; but she resigned herself trustingly to the impulses that bore her on, and asked only that he, her husband, should whisper from time to time "All's well!" And so, Winny, taking his arm, and making him walk with her by her side, for she could not recite

while his eyes rested on her face, repeated to him, somewhat tremulously, the verses that Archy had overheard. When she had finished he said very quietly,

“Again, Winny;” and she repeated them again.

“Go on, darling. I can say no more. I don't feel as though much longer I shall be a safe judge. My heart threatens henceforward to play tricks with my head. You must seek a worthier, perhaps a more public, tribunal.”

“No, no, not yet.”

“No, not yet; I agree with that. The true poet feels, I fancy, that he is committing a kind of sacrilege when he first makes common, and trusts to the rough handling of the world, that which to him has been so sacred; when he hears the trampling of unrespecting feet on the pavement of his holy of holies. Nor can that feeling pass away until he understands that it was not for the solace of his own soul, or even for its individual elevation, that he received the vision and the faculty divine, but for others. To purify *their* vision, to raise *their* aspirations, to open in *their* hearts a sense of the infinite spiritual beauty and wealth that everywhere environs them—ah, when the poet begins to feel this, all egotistical impulses die; he is no longer himself, but humanity. And shall he refuse to speak humanity's joys and sorrows—to lift it into communion with God—to put on the robes—and to take up his stand beside the altar where he is to be henceforth the ministering spirit? Somewhat too much of this, Winny, eh? Well, you see what is expected from you—mind I don't say,—what you

have achieved. You are at last beginning—beginning only still; but then if you know how much that means—”

“Oh, yes, I know,” sighed Winny softly. “It means too much for me. I can’t understand how it was I first thought of anything so improbable, so wildly presumptuous.”

“But, Winny,” interrupted Mr. Dell, “what suggested to you such a floral combination—and mostly spring-flowers again—after this gorgeous, glorious summer?”

“O, I came upon a pretty passage in the biography of Burns, where he speaks of these very flowers as his especial favourites; and you know they are also mine, every one of them. But he treats them all as spring-flowers. How can that be? I never saw the foxglove, or the harebell till summer. And I don’t remember seeing a harebell early in the summer.”

“Oho, my little ignoramus, you have made a grand mistake!”

“What? nay, don’t frighten me—”

“Burns meant the wild hyacinth, you mean the bluebell, the plant with only one or two thin, delicate, fragile, bell-like flowers on a stalk, and that stalk a mere film or thread, though strong enough, under the hand of the Divine Artificer, to support those charming bells, and to enable them to ring out their music to every breeze. A child of the sunny heath, not the woody shade. That’s your flower, is it not?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, I saw that in a moment by the first line of your verse:

' Harebells ringing, yet no wind :
As some sprite, in puzzled doubt,
Touching playfully—to find—
Shakes the timorous music out.'

The whole spirit of the verse shows it is the delicate, filmy, tremulous bluebell you mean, not the harebell."

" Ah, but harebell it was to me, and must remain. I can't lose the word. It must be right. Don't you hear its sound ? "

" Well, but, Winny, consider— "

" I won't, I won't indeed; and that I mayn't be induced to change my mind, good-bye till dinner; " and Winny flew along the hall and corridors, and disappeared.*

* Since this passage relative to the bluebell was written, the author's attention has been called to a controversy on the same subject, in the novel of " A Life for a Life." He wishes therefore to make the confession that Winny's mistake was in fact his own, and that the passage in the text was suggested exclusively by that circumstance.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE STORY OF ARCHIBALD CAIRN.

A FEW minutes after the parting of Mr. and Mrs. Dell at the porch, Archy came thither and rang the bell, which was almost immediately answered by Jean. Archy had become accustomed to this unflinching kindness and forethought in Jean, but he was never more grateful for it than now. They pressed each other's hands in silence, and then she led him across the hall, through the corridor, and so into Mr. Dell's studio, which had a separate door opening from the corridor. As they entered the half-darkened place, and Archy glanced around, he was about to speak, but Jean, with raised finger, pointed towards the other end of the old room beyond the screen, as though to indicate some one was there, and might overhear if they conversed.

"Mr. Dell will come to you presently;" and, having said this, Jean noiselessly withdrew. Archy now tried once more to frame to himself the opening words of his statement to Mr. Dell—tried to prepare himself to repress any emotion when he might again see the fair lady of the mount, whom he expected to find in Miss Addersley—tried to solace himself with the comfort, "Be firm, be patient, control yourself,

and all will soon be over, and well over!" But he could make nothing of the effort. One operation would mix itself up with another, and so the whole became a mere tangled web of fact and fancy, hope and fear, doubt and resolution; and he saw that he must trust to the influences of the moment to rouse and to extricate him, or make up his mind to be hopelessly lost for ever.

Why was Mr. Dell so long? How formal and cold everything seemed! Had he heard something, and was this only a first intimation of the change that Archy must expect in his behaviour? He rose, moved, and sat down again on a different chair. Then he got up, and went to the wall, and looked upon the pictures; and, as he thought, considered them attentively, though he could not in the least recollect afterward the subjects of those he had looked upon. He went round to see what work Mr. Dell had upon the easel, and there his wanderings of mind and body were instantaneously arrested; for there stood in a kind of other, but vivid, life, the full-length figure of the lady who filled all his imagination; her face sparkling with a kind of spiritual mirthfulness quite different from the abstract, contemplative, and yet penetrating expression that Archy had seen in his morning's watch from the leafy covert. By what secret instinct was it that Archy knew instantly that the painter of that picture had painted it with his whole heart and soul? He was sure of it: and a strange feeling arose—at once absurd and unpleasant—about Mr. Dell and Miss Addersley; for he unconsciously persisted in identifying the latter with that sweet form—half-child, half-

angel, yet all woman, he had gazed on. How long he might have continued thus perilously drinking in draught after draught from that—to him—unfailing fountain of loveliness, it would be hard to say; for an irresistible fascination possessed him, and seemed to whisper, as the eyes of the picture met his own, that it was to him that that simple, arch, exquisite creature was addressing herself; that here, and thus, she might do so blamelessly, and he receive and enjoy and be blessed in such communion: but he was soon checked, and rudely shaken.

“Ah, Archy, old fellow!” cried the loud good-humoured voice that he knew so well, and which sounded more cheerily than ever just now—“Ah, Archy, is that really you? Well, I am delighted to see you. But what’s the matter—have you been ill?”

“Yes,” cried Archy, mastering a kind of internal spasm.

“Oh, well, never mind; we’ll soon get you round again, since you didn’t die outright. Stop short of that, and there’s hope, you know. Come, let me introduce you to my wife. Oh, I see you have done that for yourself already. I thought, Archy, I had turned that picture to the wall. You are the first person who has seen it. Be silent—you understand—a little surprise for my wife’s next birthday. But how wretchedly ill you look.” And here Mr. Dell took Archy with a sort of brotherly interest and curiosity, nearer to the window—where the light fell upon his easel, and gazed so earnestly in Archy’s face, that the poor fellow thought the investigation would

never end, and he felt how terrible was the play of conflicting emotions that he could not conceal, how dread must be the confession he was making!

"Archy, is there anything wrong? Have you anything to tell me?" asked Mr. Dell, after his protracted examination.

"Yes, yes—by-and-by—give me a little time."

"Shall I fetch you anything—a glass of wine? The ladies are at the other end of the room. Would you like to stay here a bit with me alone, or shall we go to them and wait for another opportunity, when you are quite recovered.

"I will go with you. Don't mind this—this weakness; 'twill pass over."

"Come along, then. Stay, I will just say you are here, and return for you." He went beyond the screen, leaving Archy, who moved a little, so that he could see the portrait, and then with quivering lips murmured—"His wife! Fool—fool that I was not to understand that sooner. Take your last look, and wake once more to learn the price of your idiot-dreams. How beautiful she is! Does he know what God has given to him? Oh, he must—he must!"

He heard voices now beyond the screen, and among them he distinguished *that* voice, though it, like the picture, was changed in expression from what he had previously known; it was now ringing with happy laughter—the very tones that must belong to that deliciously *naïve*, mirthful face. But suddenly there was a change, and a murmuring under-current of remarks in a lower key. "Yes, doubtless," thought he,

“Mr. Dell is saying something about me. My time is come. I am glad of it. I grow very weary.”

Mr. Dell here again appeared, and said,

“Now then, Archy.” He advanced, and beheld through the long antique room, well known in old days to him, a confused vision of extremely light windows, of a lawn and garden with richly-coloured flowers, of a veil of delicate lace curtains, and of two figures just within the windows, one tall, the other shorter, and of both these figures advancing and greeting him in tones of unaffected courtesy and kindness; and then of his uttering, or trying to utter, something, he knew not what; and of his being pushed, in the genial old way, by Mr. Dell into the low cozy arm-chair, and then of a dead silence; as though the very pulses of the world had stopped, and all creation waited, in blank, mute expectancy, the coming of a new revelation.

But among true friends sympathy soon wins its way, and removes a thousand apparent obstacles. By their continuous chat among themselves, diverging only now and then to him just sufficiently to make him feel he was neither forgotten nor intruded on; by a thousand little nameless tones, looks, words, acts, Archy was drawn by those about him out of his overwrought fanciful terrors. Mr. Dell more than once set the ladies laughing; and so obviously in spite of themselves (as it was rather at their expense, Archy understood), that Archy himself began first to sigh and then to smile, and to feel more calm and better able to confront the inevitable business before him. Grace tried hard to make him eat a little

pigeon pie, for an early lunch was upon the table, but that he could not manage, and he gave up the attempt after one ineffectual essay. Mrs. Dell was more successful with a glass of champagne; he drank it somewhat eagerly. His eyes brightened, his colour and courage returned. There are times, I must own, when a glass of wine will produce magical effects.

Mr. Dell, whom nothing escaped, saw, rose, and spoke—

“Well, Archy, shall we have a stroll, or will you stay where you are? Come, I hate beating about the bush. Grace tells me she knows more than I do,—I suppose from Jean, and that she and my wife claim to share my interest in your welfare, and are, in fact, dying to know all about it, and they warn me that I am not to be sworn to secrecy, and so on. What say you? It is my wife and my cousin, you know; but choose freely.”

“I can have no choice in such a matter,” replied Archy, in a tone of such painful constraint as to reveal but too clearly what was passing within. “Although the story is a most sad and humiliating one to me, I can have no right to invest it with any additional difficulties for those who are kind enough to express a desire to hear it.”

“Come, then, sit down again, and make yourself at home. Stay, I will move your chair nearer the window:—the play of this crisp invigorating breeze, and the sight of this clear crystal atmosphere, just between the rain that has past and the rain that I fear is coming, will do you good. See, there is the champagne—don't be afraid of it; I know you are

like me, a temperate man, unless you are greatly changed."

"No, I am the same—in that," said Archy, with a forced smile, and thankful to Mr. Dell for his thoughtful kindness; for in moving the chair he had so placed Archy that he would have no one's eyes upon him. And the very *feel*—if I may use the word—of the quiet yet active friendliness at work about him shamed him out of his least reasonable fears, and animated him in all his more justifiable hopes. Presently he began, but stopped to say first—

"Jean knows only the worst of the story; perhaps, if you see no objection—"

"Oh, certainly, I am glad you thought of it." And Mr. Dell went away, and immediately returned with Jean, who would only sit just within the door.

"It is but right that I should warn you," began Archy, "that my mother, for many and weighty reasons with which Jean is acquainted, suspends her own judgment in a matter deeply affecting my honour and future prospects in life, in order that she may first hear yours, and be guided to a great extent by it."

"She honours me," observed Mr. Dell: "more, I fear, than I deserve—but go on."

"I must also warn you that, while her very life probably hangs on your decision, she is herself too keen-sighted, too firm, and too courageous, to be content with anything like the partial verdict of a friend."

"I own, Archy, you startle me; but still you give me faith. You, who perceive so justly the duty of

guarding me beforehand against prepossessions, even while showing me how much depends upon my opinion, cannot have anything very serious to reproach yourself with." Mr. Dell said this cheerily; but Grace saw that he looked grave immediately afterwards, and fixed his eyes on the ground, with a somewhat marked watchfulness and concentration of thought. Archy continued,—

"Spare me the recital of the folly that broke up my studies at the University, just when I had passed through them with honour, and was preparing to shape forth some active career in the world. It was a folly only, and all its effects have passed away; though it so seriously unmanned me for the moment, that I think I should have wickedly struck at my own life, but that a new current was given to my reflections by an acquaintance who knew my position and sufferings, and who advised me to join the army in the Crimea. 'Shut out,' said he, 'by new occupations, and by the stir of that grandly tumultuous life, the recollections that are preying upon you.'

"'But,' I replied, 'I have no money, no friend that can obtain me a commission. Or if my mother's influence with former friends of my father could help me, it would take a long time, and be quite useless for present purposes.'

"'Go as a private then,' he urged. '*I* would. Look here;'—and he unfolded a newspaper, and showed me a list of serjeants and others who had just been raised from the ranks to be commissioned officers. 'See, a new era is opening. It is certain that men like you would be welcomed. Do your duty,

and you must rise, and rapidly.' I listened, was convinced, enlisted that day, was sent to Chatham to join the depôt of the regiment, and began at once to drill, and to learn as well and as quickly as I could a soldier's business and duty.

"At first all went happily with me. The change did what I expected from it—removed the perilous stuff from my heart that was then weighing it down; I recovered health and spirits; and was told, more than once, I should make a smart soldier, and be promoted. I cannot say I liked my comrades, or that they liked me; that was impossible; there was too great a gulf between us in tastes, habits, views, our past lives, and our future prospects. But still we got on sufficiently well. I didn't offend them by any obvious assumption of superiority; and they, in their rough way, acknowledged, with a kind of tacit respect, that I was a book-man, a scholar, and must be excused when I withdrew from the fun or tumult of the hour, or declined to join them in a visit to the canteen. I was then studying books on military science, and, as I thought, began to see my way clearly and hopefully.

"There was a non-commissioned officer, a pay-sergeant, who sometimes exchanged a word with me, and who, I fancied, often looked in my face with an odd expression, that I could not understand. He had been raised to that post, I heard, rather through his cunning in winning favour with the captain than on the ground of his skill in accounts; though no doubt, he managed pretty well. From looks and comments he passed to questions; and I at once perceived, in spite of the thin veil he tried to throw over his

thoughts, by gossiping on a great variety and a great medley of subjects, that his curiosity was all directed to certain points, such as my knowledge of figures, (of which he had heard somewhat from the other soldiers, who were impressed by the aspect of my books on mathematics),—and my moral notions of men and things:—his own views being obviously cynical and unflattering as to the honesty of the world. He also wanted to know where I came from, and what I was aiming to do. I forgot to tell you that I had changed my name.”

“Why?” asked Mr. Dell suddenly, and, as Archy fancied, severely.

“Because I had a sort of feeling all the while that I was not doing a very wise thing, and that I might have to leave the army in disappointment; and therefore, for the present at least, that I ought to spare my mother the pain of knowing anything about an experiment that was so problematical in its nature, and only make it known to her when it had so far succeeded that I had advanced, and might expect to go on. I knew that my mother’s feelings would be not so much against the army, in which my father had won high respect, as against my unprepared entrance into it; and the general unfitness, as she would deem it, of my habits, character, and mind for such a pursuit.

“It is very painful,” continued Archy, after a pause, “to have to add that I was also but too well aware of what would be the bitterness of my mother’s disappointment at the loss of so many years, so much study, and so much money that she could ill spare, in fitting me for a professional life. Oh, believe me, I

have never forgotten or forgiven myself for so disregarding or forgetting those considerations. It was—I know it—cruel and selfish to the last degree; and I will not dwell on my excuses.”

Mr. Dell wished to say something cheering, but could not manage it. He knew how poor Mrs. Cairn had straitened herself to win a fortune for her son; and he felt it *was* selfish and cruel in Archy to have thrown all away by one rash act. But then he reflected further—“Some love affair, I suppose. Men will do mad things in love; and so young too! Come, I will not judge my old play-fellow unkindly.” And then he said aloud,

“Come, Archy, proceed. Imagine all this only a surgical operation intended for your great relief afterwards. Ah, that’s right, Grace, give him another glass of wine. If he takes advantage of our incitements, and misbehaves in future, we’ll make him take the pledge. So, another glass now, if only in the triumphant consciousness of the securities we are going to take against future license.”

And Grace, with a smile that recalled vividly to Archy what Jean had told him, and which now seemed to say,—“Don’t fear, I am not shaken!” came to him, and poured out another glass of champagne; and Archy, as he drank it, ventured one side glance to Winny, and saw she was looking on him with an air of inexpressible tenderness; her eyes humid with half-repressed tears; and she too seemed to say, “Fear not: you are among friends.” Archy drank, and proceeded with his story. As to poor Jean, he thought not of her then.

“One day I was suddenly sent for by the pay-sergeant. I found him very ill, with a half-fever, and greatly troubled with his accounts, which were required by the captain, who had told him to get help if he liked, but in any case to let him have them promptly. He said he had been vainly trying to balance them; that every time he cast up a page it came to a different sum; and he begged me to go through them for him. I did so; found many mistakes, and some that looked like, to me, double entries of the same thing. But he said they were different. Various other little things I found that made me very uncomfortable, though at first I suspected they were merely the result of his imperfect knowledge and skill. But when I brought the whole to a balance, and showed that he had several pounds more in hand than he had supposed, he looked at me as though I were in some way responsible for so unpleasant a result—muttered something I could not hear—and began himself to go over the whole again.

“At last he fetched a bottle from the cupboard, and said, with a ghastly sort of smile, ‘Like whisky? I can’t touch anything, you know, while the doctor’s got hold of me; but come, you help yourself.’ I didn’t like to refuse; for my thoughts just then were of a nature that seemed to make my refusal appear suspicious even to myself. So I took a little, but determined secretly it should be very little.

“Then he grew gracious: and spoke of my prospects. Would I like to be a corporal? I said, ‘Yes, very much.’

“‘Then you shall be. I can manage that easily.’

And then he reverted to the accounts. 'It's clear I'm about seven pounds short; but it's equally clear I've spent the money, for, of course, I never mix the regimental funds with my own. Let's see; how is it to be managed?' I saw the time was come to speak: and so I said very plainly,

"There's no management possible in the matter, sergeant, but this—you have expended the money, you say, you must then try to recollect how. Let's go through the days, and the items, one by one; I shall be very glad if'—But I saw now very plainly what was passing below that swelled, dark, inflamed face; and he was aware that I saw. But I did not flinch—nor did he. Presently he said, with a laugh—such a brutal one I never before heard, I think, in all my life,

"Comrade, you must help me out of this, or—"

"Or what?"

"Blast you,—I'll make the place too hot to hold you! By G— I will! Come, no more nonsense; I've found you out."

"Found me out! What do you mean by that?"

"You are Martin Todd, are you? Oh, of course you are. And you had nothing to conceal under that alias, eh?" Though I was startled and seriously annoyed by the whole affair, which grew every moment more unpleasant and dangerous, I was sufficiently on my guard to try if he knew my real name, so I said,—

"Well, sergeant, I think you are little mistaken; but come, tell me what I am called, if Martin Todd is not my right appellation, and then I will repay your frankness."

"'Oh, you 're coming round, are you? Of course I know your real name—'

"'And that is—?' Again I saw his gathering rage, as he perceived that I was incredulous; and so I rose and wished him good morning, and was going away, but he stopped me. And I confess I could not resist an inward shrinking as I marked the diabolical malignity of his glance.

"'Once again I give you your choice, pleasant and *profitable* quarters—you understand?—and promotion—or—'

"'If I do understand you, and for your own sake, sergeant, I hope I do not, I can only say I am astonished alike at your impudence and your rascality: and I warn you I shall go from hence to the captain, and—'

"'Now don'tee, don'tee, there's a good boy,' he said with an insufferable smile. 'And before you go, see how I've been playing with you. I told you I was seven pounds short, didn't I? I lied for the fun of the thing. See:—'—And then he counted out on the table, with an elaborateness and ostentation of accuracy which I perfectly understood, the exact sum that I had found by the books, after all my corrections, he ought to have in hand.

"'There, you see, all's right. We won't trouble each other with any more meetings. We don't fit it. Somehow I can't drink to-day, and you, perhaps, won't be inclined to drink when we next meet. The world's big enough for us both, if only we keep apart. March, my boy, in time, that's all! You're a sharp fellow, I see, and can understand other things besides

accounts, eh? I shall say and do nothing till after to-night about your proposition to me. You 're a young fellow, and may escape for once. Good-bye. Take another glass? You won't? That's the way to the captain's quarters, good-bye.' He then opened the door for me, and fairly bowed me out. Words were useless, and as to acts, I knew if I touched him I should be myself a dead man.

"Of course I was well aware what he meant. He had guarded himself beforehand. He had found I was not willing to be his instrument. I was now to get out of his way, in a word, to desert. And supposing I did do that, he would probably explain my sudden absence after a visit to him by some damning charge against me. But I was so indignant at the whole business, that I determined to laugh his threats to scorn, and remain doing my duty as a soldier too well for him or any one to injure me."

"Quite right, Archy, I honour your resolve," exclaimed Mr. Dell, with animation.

"But when I considered about going to the captain, which I felt strongly impelled to do, I was met at once by the reflection,—'Why, I have not a single fact to bring forward in proof of an almost incredible statement! On the contrary, there are the accounts accurately balanced, and he has cunningly kept in hand, ready for just such a contingency, the amount of his intended frauds, so that on the surface of things nothing could be more satisfactory. He would smile as he showed his books and papers, and produce his actual cash; and the captain would smile in return as he examined them, after hearing my statement.

And I—yes, what position should I stand in? why just the position the scoundrel had prepared to assign to me. Probably (reversing our actual positions) he would charge me with some fraudulent suggestion, founded on the errors he had made me look for and discover; and I had already had proof how well he would act out his virtuous indignation, and I could guess with what triumphant success.'

"I did not know what to do. I was paralysed between the desire to act rightly and the desire not to compromise myself and my fortune unnecessarily or imprudently. I determined to wait until the next morning, at any rate. By that time my fate was determined. Suddenly, I scarcely know how, a quarrel was fastened on me by one of the most ignorant of the soldiers, who shared my barrack room; I was knocked down, had a black eye, and was much bruised and shaken. At parade my appearance was noticed by the captain; and he spoke to me, for the first time, in so insulting a tone of reproof, that I forgot I was Martin Todd and a private soldier, and answered quickly and disrespectfully. Two minutes later I was a prisoner, and being marched off to a prison cell. On my way, the sergeant met me, and stood fixedly staring till I had gone past, and then I heard his low brutal laugh. Half-maddened, I took the first opportunity to send an urgent message to the captain, begging him to come to me. He did come, and the sergeant was with him. I begged him to see me alone; with a quietly contemptuous wave of the hand he bade the sergeant leave us,—and then, though conscious I was engaged in a hopeless task, I told

him word for word all that had passed between the sergeant and myself. When I had done, he said simply,

“ ‘Todd, I thought we were going to have in you a soldier who would be a credit to the regiment. That very sergeant did speak to me about you, but it was to advance your interests. Be silent, sir; I know what you would say; but it is you who must hear what I have to say. I see in you, then, in one word, a treacherous scoundrel, and I say to you, beware!’ Before I could again address him he had left the cell.

“ And then I was imprisoned for many weeks for my insolence, and when I came out the first man to meet me was the sergeant. Again he looked at me, and again sent after me the low, brutal laugh that seemed at once to inflame and yet curdle my blood. I dare not attempt to narrate the petty oppressions to which I was thenceforward subjected. By degrees every man’s hand and heart seemed to rise against me. Things were whispered about that I had said, or done—now against this man, now against that—of which I knew no more than their dreadful consequences. Life became unendurable. Again and again was I imprisoned; but I guarded myself so carefully, that the punishment never went, never could go beyond imprisonment, until one day, when I was sitting alone in the barrack room, a comrade came up rather hurriedly, passed me to go towards his own bed-head, pulled some clothes from under the pillow, and then suddenly exclaimed,

“ ‘I have been robbed. A few minutes ago I left a

sovereign and some silver here and now the sovereign’s gone.’

“Oh, look more carefully, and you’ll find it;” I replied, ‘I’ve seen no one go near your things, and I’ve not been out of the room since parade.’ Other soldiers came up and joined him as he angrily denounced the crime that had been perpetrated. The windows were open, and the discussion was very loud; presently entered the sergeant. My heart fell as I saw him. Some new calamity was impending. He bustled about and came forward, asking what was the matter, and when he had learned, he asked from all present if they suspected any one:—

“‘You know, boys,’ said he, ‘this concerns the honour of the regiment; let’s have no thieves among us, so speak out, no delicacies now. Do you suspect me? For if you do, you’re welcome to search my pockets.’ And the men laughed heartily at the joke, but no one answered his questions; presently, however, I saw that they were all looking towards me; and then I heard my name:

“‘Todd? No, no, boys, he’s an ungracious chick enough, I dare say, but I don’t think he’s a thief; but I suppose I may examine your stores, Todd?’ And there came again towards me the loud, brutal, terribly-meaning laugh.

“‘Yes,’ I said, though the tongue clove to the roof of my mouth; for I felt instinctively certain that some game was being played out, in which he was to be the chief actor and I the sole victim. He came—examined my pockets—my spare clothes—my bedding—and then turning, exclaimed,

“‘No, no, boys, as I told you, we must look elsewhere for the thief.’ At that instant another soldier, one I liked the best of all the men in the troop, called out—

“‘I don’t know how that may be, but here *is* a sovereign, slipped into an ingenious hiding-place too.’ We all looked—I say we, for I shared at that moment the common surprise. Yes, there was a sovereign, so placed between a chink of the wood-work that it might have escaped the discoverer’s eyes, but for the gleam of the edge.

“Denials, from me however scornful were useless. Useless all appeals! Derisive cries were my only answer. Maddened by their senseless injustice, I forgot all precautions—all control; two or three half tipsy men who had just stolen in, alone took my side, —caring for neither right nor wrong, but full primed for a row. Blows were exchanged, even arms were snatched at, and in the end several of us were consigned to the guard.

“I have only to add that I was tried by court martial, and sentenced to be dismissed, with ignominy, from the regiment. They would have flogged and retained me, I believe, but for the captain, who was instigated, I doubt not, by the sergeant to get me out of the regiment: if they had flogged me, my mind was made up to die under my assumed name, and give no sign. But this irremediable infamy was spared me; I was dismissed as such men are dismissed.”—Archy paused. —His head had gradually sunk lower and lower on his chest, but as he slowly uttered the last words, he raised it, and while his eye remained fixed with an

unnatural brilliancy upon Mr. Dell's slightest movement, he inhaled a long breath, and said steadily in a deeper tone than he had yet used—

"*I have been 'drummed out'!*" Presently he went on,—

"My mother, and Jean, to whom I had written some time before, begging them to procure my discharge, came in time to see the degrading sentence executed.—When I got outside the barrack gate I heard a cry, and saw my mother lying bleeding on the ground." Archy was silent for a minute; and all respected his emotions, and were silent too. Then he continued, "But she is saved for a time. If I am believed—if"—he spoke now very huskily, and stopped. A hand was laid on his shoulder.

"Archy, is this all? A friend might hear more, and not give you up. You will trust me with the whole truth."

"On my soul, I have told you all—and with less of excuse perhaps for my conduct than I might urge."

"Then Archy, on *my* soul, I believe you; and will make your mother believe you, too. What say you, ladies? Innocent, or—" Winny could bear no more; with streaming eyes she came to where Archy sat by the window,—looking straight before him, yet with an indefinite gaze,—and said, "Be of good cheer. I am so glad you are with us." Then she took his hand, and pressed it.

"And this is *your* first experience in the world, is it?" she continued, addressing him with tender sympathy.

But Archy could answer nothing to her.

"Well, come, Archy, to business. This matter must be looked to, and you must be righted (if that be possible) at any cost. What present occupation have you, or—" income, he was about to add, but felt restrained.

"None; and I fear my mother needs my help greatly. But you have comforted me. I will work for her."

"No doubt: but how can we set your mind at rest for a bit?" inquired Mr. Dell; speaking, however, rather to himself than to Archy.

"Couldn't he,—and Mrs. Cairn too,—give me lessons?" asked Winny in her usual straightforward, unhesitating way.

"Certainly, a good thought. Come then, Master Archy, we shall expect you daily at ten o'clock, say for a couple of hours, beginning to-morrow; and we will arrange about Mrs. Cairn's visits as soon as she is quite strong again. This will give us full opportunity to talk over the other matter. Are you satisfied?" Archy looked at him but could neither speak nor move, not even his hand; and Mr. Dell's own eyes began to be blinded with moisture, as he saw how his old playmate was overborne by the great rushing, overwhelming sense of their kindness; but when Archy, after some terrible efforts of resistance, fairly gave way, and dropped his hand and head upon the table, and was seen and heard to suffer what men only can suffer at such times, Mr. Dell sat down beside him, let his hand rest on Archy's shoulder, and motioned to the others to go away and leave them to themselves. And they all went.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SYMPATHY AND COUNSEL.

AMONG those unseen powers that influence human affairs so deeply and so unobtrusively, and that promise still larger issues in the future, when we shall have better fitted ourselves to appreciate and make use of them, there is one power,—perhaps the greatest of them all,—to which we are habitually very ungrateful. It is that which touches the heart of the poet, and lo! he understands at once all hearts; it is that which draws your Howards into the gloomiest dungeon-depths, and enables them to revive hope under the very ribs of despair,—your Florence Nightingales to exchange the luxurious drawing-room for the fetid and ghastly hospital,—your city missionaries to carry a gleam of spirit-light and purity into the filthiest and darkest of the homes of the poor; it is that, too, which in private life guides the wandering footsteps of love; deprives business of its harsher tones and tendencies; teaches the legislator that durable human laws can only be based on permanent natural ones; reminds the sovereign, in tones he must hear, that the brightest jewel in his crown, Mercy, sheds a double radiance,—namely on his own soul, and on the soul of the suppliant who is listened to.

Yet we raise no statues to this power. We do not even, with the touching and instinctive faith and the blind ignorance of the Athenians, publicly acknowledge our "Unknown God." On the contrary, we dislike even to mention its name. We carefully guard ourselves in a thousand ways against its approaches, lest it might lead us away, we know not whither. We look upon a man as doomed who allows it openly to keep him company on the mart, in the campaign, in the chambers of the diplomatist, or in the halls of parliament. We have even a special appellation for it when we wish to thrust it back into its usual state of forced oblivion and inefficiency; we call it then "sentiment"; and we deride—and do our best socially to paralyse—all those who speak in its behalf, as "sentimental." But the true name of this power is Sympathy: and its real mission is, to bind together the entire family of man, heedless of men's absurd or selfish distinctions, and compelling modifications of their prudent or more necessary ones. In a word, Sympathy is with us just that one touch of nature that makes the whole world kin, and at present it is no more. But the time must come when it will exercise a wider sway, as inferior instincts are mastered, material difficulties removed, nobler motives accepted for the daily guidance of life.

And it was that power which had now, step by step, saved Archibald Cairn in the most critical period of his existence. First, through the sight of his mother, senseless on the ground, at the barrack gate: a spectacle that dispersed in an instant the terrible and dangerous cloud that overhung his wandering and

chaotic mind ; and made him think only of her, when, a moment before, it would have seemed impossible that any earthly event could have drawn him out of himself. Then, with the new terror of her danger, and remorse for its cause, came also the sense of Jean's unchangeable devotion to his mother and to himself ; and that was indeed sweet. And as this terror was gradually allayed, and as he perceived the reviving love of his mother, there needed but one thing more to secure all these precious acquisitions, and that one thing came in Mr. Dell's manly friendship. Archy felt all this, and a thousand times more than this, surging through his mind, as he sat at Mr. Dell's table with his head buried in his hands ; no longer able to control the tenderer and more sympathetic emotions of his nature, now that he had, at last, manfully fought his way through the hideous revelation, and achieved all he had hoped by it, the honest, cordial belief of his hearers in the truth of his story.

Mr. Dell scarcely spoke to him for a few minutes, content to know that Archy would understand by the old boyish touch upon the shoulder, all that the one could possibly have desired to say, or the other to hear. He knew this passionate violence would soon exhaust itself. He knew it was but the natural termination of a long and dreadful period of secret suffering and perpetual fear ; and all his old love for Archy revived as he found the young man needing so much sympathy, and so well able to profit by it.

And Archy was indeed profiting by it. He felt how idle it would be to attempt to speak of what he felt,—or of the relief he had experienced,—or of the

overwhelming, almost painful, sense of gratitude, that had taken the place of his former trouble, (painful because he felt so helpless, so unable even to dream of a mode of repayment,) but, at all events, he would do what was permitted to him :—

And this is what he did. He came to a silent resolution with himself that no chance or temptation should ever again surprise him, as he had already too often been surprised, into acts of indiscretion, which had generally been the forerunners of a whole series of acts of more than indiscretion. Yes, he made that resolution now, as men do make all such resolves when they really mean to keep them, that is, with a concentrated energy of purpose sufficient to brush aside all obstacles, a clear-sightedness as to facts and means, and a calculated willingness to endure, if necessary, future suffering, in expiation of past offences.

And as there is no freemasonry that equals sympathy in its art of making men apprehend each other's meaning without words, Mr. Dell soon perceived what Archy was about, though scarcely a sentence on the subject passed between them. There was, however, a cordial clinging grasp of the hands in mutual recognition, and all was said, and done, and over.

But after that they talked long and earnestly about the practical aspects of the case, trying to discover what would be the best mode of procedure in the effort to re-establish Archy's character. But nothing promising was elicited.

"Well, Archy," said Mr. Dell, during a pause, "I am glad you did change your name. If we fail, and

are obliged finally to give up the attempt, it is consolatory to remember that in all probability you will never, in your new life and occupation, meet with any one who knew Martin Todd, or who, at all events, can now recognise him in Archibald Cairn."

"Yes, I feel that."

"And if any unlucky mishap does occur you will have me to fall back upon. It shall go hard if I cannot prevent any serious injury to you. But now, let us recapitulate. This, apparently, is all that at present comes from our cogitations:—I must write to Payne Croft, give him full particulars, and leave the case in his hands. I may tell you he is a rising barrister, and altogether a very promising fellow. He would like, I fancy, to do me a good turn—so here is a chance for him. He may possibly know some acute attorney in Chatham who can watch this friend of yours—this pay-sergeant. By the bye, what is his name?"

"Dunk—Sergeant Matthew Dunk."

"Write it down for me. Also the name of the man who discovered the sovereign, and whom you say you rather like."

"Yes."

"Probably, then, he did really discover the money—just as he appeared to do?"

"I feel sure of it."

"And the doctor who attended your mother, and who was so intelligent and kind, you had better mention him also. He may be serviceable, if only to express his knowledge of your mother's character and high principle, as exhibited in her conduct to you,

and his own favourable opinion, personally, as to yourself."

"Yes, there it is—Dr. Simpson."

"Very well. Now then, lastly, can you give any, the least idea, not of what is probably,—for the whole affair is too difficult to talk of probabilities,—but of what is possibly the actual truth of the matter? There can be no doubt, I suppose, that the Sergeant knew of the previous hiding-place of the money?"

"I have not the remotest doubt of it."

"Can he have been in the barrack-room, alone, that morning, previously?"

"I think not. I may say, I am sure not; for when I went back an hour or so after morning parade, I found a man there who had returned direct from the parade, and who told me when I questioned him after the discovery, that no one but he had been in the room till I came."

"And was the Sergeant himself on parade at the time?"

"Yes."

"That's decisive, then, so far. But now, candidly, how do you think the sovereign could have been placed where it was found?"

"By the Sergeant's own hands, during the confusion that prevailed in the room on the first discovery of the theft. I see no other possible explanation."

"And—remembering the character and progress of the scene—should you say that that was possible?"

"Yes."

"Probably, then, you are right. But this—if true—removes only half our difficulty; nay, scarcely half.

How could the coin have been abstracted from the pocket of the owner?"

"Perhaps it was not the *same* coin?"

"Ha! true; we must not forget that possibility. You think, perhaps, that the man lost his money in some other way, and that his loss was taken advantage of by the Sergeant for his own amiable purposes?"

"I know not what to think. The man was a blundering, but not dishonest fellow."

"Not a confederate, then?"

"Oh, no."

"I think you are right. The Sergeant, notwithstanding the boldness of his game with you, was not fool enough to risk the possibility of charges from different quarters being brought against him nearly at the same time. If so, we must confine our attention to that theory, which, while perfectly including the known facts, proceeds upon the hypothesis that the Sergeant himself is the only villain in the affair, though there may still be others innocently engaged in it."

"Yes."

"And through those others, perhaps, we may discover the clue?"

"Perhaps—yes, I hope so. My mother could, I doubt not, get one or two powerful military friends to interfere, but—"

"But only by exposing your true name! And I don't think we want such help; not just yet, at all events. To discover the truth is our object,—in other words, to unkennel this rascally fox; and for such a purpose the keen nose of some shrewd attorney will be worth more than all the power and authority of the

commander-in-chief. And now, Archy, as a friend, I advise you to let the matter rest. Banish it as far as possible from your thoughts. Everything that can be done, shall be done ; let that knowledge content you. Feel that you are at home again. We'll track the old walks together. Nay, I don't see why we shouldn't go off for a day or two now and then with knapsacks on our backs, and forget, for a few hours, that there are such things in the world as duties or responsibilities. Eh ! old fellow ? I shall have out the fishing tackle, and—come, to begin, let George bring us the horses, and we'll have a scamper over the downs, right away to the very sea. We may get back to dinner. What say you ?” And then, as if the cheery words alone might not have been sufficient, Mr. Dell let his hand fall good-humouredly, but still with a rousing slap, on the shoulders of the still half-dreaming, half-troubled Archy ; who started, straightened himself, looked and laughed—the old frank, hearty laugh—how well Mr. Dell knew it !—and before many minutes they were on horseback, and hurrying off, and,—somewhat, it must be confessed, to the ladies' surprise,—they heard Archy's laugh not the least loud among the mirthful peals that accompanied the departure.

CHAPTER XIX.

TEACHER AND PUPIL.

“THE Shadow in the House!” where is it? Surely not in Bletchworth. There, if anywhere in this chequered world, eternal sunshine seems to have settled. Mr. Dell is profoundly happy in his wife; is surrounded with all the material conditions of social enjoyment and consideration; is advancing in his amateur-art just enough to satisfy his conscience that he cannot be called an idle man, and to give him a kind of confidence that he is able to reciprocate his wife’s intellectual tastes and pursuits in a manner not unworthy of her, or damaging to his own self-respect. His cup is full, and running over: but he is so silently grateful for it all, that he does not tempt fortune to try any experiments upon him by his own vanity, or display, or self-engrossment.

And Winny, though growing less demonstrative since the first chill experienced on her entrance into society, is no less happy than her husband, while far more earnestly engaged in mental pursuits. No young collegian determined to carry off all the highest “honours” could study more assiduously than she does now; and this, not simply for the better fulfilment of the duties of her position, but because she

sees, with ever increasing interest (and sometimes with sudden alarm), how her own nature and aims require educational development. She is very silent, though, about the matter; talks little about it even to Grace, and not at all to Mr. Dell; but battles her way along with unfailing courage; often driven back for a moment by the utter failure of her weary, confused brain to comprehend the vast maze of knowledge it has entered upon,—and which it seeks to master by one grand heroic effort, rather than by slow, patient, tedious detail,—but always returning to the attack with new strength, and always conquering the particular difficulty at last.

She works too hard, doubtless; but is still very happy. And when, let me ask, did hard work alone, I mean, by its own intrinsic nature—and freed from other difficulties—ever prevent happiness? I think never. I am sure it has often given people the first taste of enjoyment they have known for many years:—people who were miserable, until, by some accident, they discovered the virtue of hard work. And so, in spite of her being overtasked by her own energies and desires, Mrs. Dell is happy; but then, you perceive, the work is not exacted from her; and in doing it she believes she will add to her husband's happiness, while she is quite sure it will deepen, strengthen, and improve her own being. Yes, she, like her husband, is very happy.

And Grace—? Well, even Grace Addersley appears, to casual observers, to draw a constant pleasure from the sight of all this married bliss. One might have supposed that, under the circumstances, she

would have preferred rather to know that the man she had expected to marry was happy with another woman, than to see, or to investigate daily and hourly, the proofs: and that, if a gentle shadow did throw its soft tender colouring over her heart, she would not need to drive it away, or deny it, but might let it die out at its own time. But Grace is a peculiar woman. She does *not* go away; and yet no shadow is ever seen to envelope her in gloom. Perhaps she thinks it may do her good to study so fair an aspect of domestic life, and to nerve herself the while against natural womanly shrinkings and weaknesses, in order, determinedly, to make others forget (and so, possibly, herself) that she has ever nourished thoughts that were in their nature seriously antagonistic to the existing state of things.

There is, then, no shadow, apparently, over Grace's heart now; neither Mr. nor Mrs. Dell ever meet her during the day, in the corridor or on the lawn, in the studio, the drawing-room, or at meals, but they see the quick smile light up the face, and they hear the pleasant musical-voiced remark or inquiry rise on the lips, always having some immediate relation to the thoughts, comforts, or interest of the one who is addressed. And I forgot to say how much this behaviour of Grace adds to the happiness of husband and wife, and how warmly it makes them feel towards her. Certainly it would be a shock to them both now were she to talk of leaving Bletchworth.

That Grace should be thus at ease and contented is the more satisfactory, since she has not, as they have, any noticeable occupation. Mrs. Dell is her own

house-manager ; though her only reason for not accepting Grace's frequently proffered services is, that she thinks she ought to do what is necessary to be done herself ; and that, with her habits and temptations, if she once gave way on such a point she would find the duties unnaturally irksome if she were ever again compelled to resume them. And, of course, she thinks to herself, Grace will marry some day : perhaps soon. She has often wondered why this had not happened before. And sometimes she has speculated—just for an instant or two—on the theme—“ Why did not Mr. Dell's fancy go that way ? ” But she was herself too well satisfied with the fact, and its consequences personally, to trouble herself with such hypothetical questions.

Yet though thus unoccupied, it is evident to any one who may happen to look steadily into Grace's features and eye, that there is no lack of occupation felt. If hers is not exactly a well furnished mind, it is certainly one of a strong, self-sustaining character ; with large resources of its own, and with extensive tracts of thought all about it, over which it may range and find food. One occupation Mrs. Dell has given to her, and Grace makes much of it. During the two hours' instruction that Winny daily receives from Archy, Grace is always understood to be present. This understanding arose from Winny's own suggestion, after the first meeting with Archy, and when the first powerful impressions of his story had passed. She was then rather startled as she reflected that she had invited herself to a daily meeting, for a couple of hours, with a young man whom she had never before

seen. She could not help wishing she had waited for her husband to be the first to make such a proposition. However, it was done—she had committed herself, and she had too much spirit to retract to the injury of Archy's prospects, unless for weightier reasons than any that now presented themselves. Once, though, she wondered whether Mr. Dell could have been at all surprised at her sudden—and, as she feared, half-inconsiderate act? But no; his face and manner had never changed for a moment. Probably, if he had thought of it at all, it was simply to enjoy her unconventional sympathy and promptitude. But however that might be, Winny said quietly the next morning to Grace, as Archy was seen coming through the chestnut avenue—

“I think, dear, it might be as well for you to be present during these lessons, though we need not appear to have arranged anything of the kind formally.”

“Yes, dear, I understand. And I think you are quite right.”

“Why, Grace, to own the truth,” and Winny slightly blushed as she spoke, “I was not exactly thinking of myself, or of what I was about yesterday, when I proposed—”

“O, no, but I understood you, and should myself have suggested something of the kind if you had not. I'll be here when he comes and goes, and slip in and out occasionally, just as I might be doing were he not here.”

“Thank you,” said Winny, though with a sort of consciousness, after all, that she was making much ado about nothing.

And so the lessons began.

And, with them, opened a new phase in the career of Archibald Cairn. At first he was shy, sensitive and taciturn; and it was with difficulty he could even fairly acquit himself of the duty he had undertaken; and which, after a brief talk with the new pupil, it was determined should open with the reading of English history, and with the learning of the French language. But by degrees he gained confidence, as he saw the sweet simple ingenuousness of soul that so often appealed to him when he least expected it; running aside from the formal course of the lesson to ask an explanation of this difficulty, or the meaning of that fact; or more noticeable still,—to compel him to grapple with principles or problems he had never before noticed, much less mastered, but which could not escape her fresh eye, and searching mind. He was thus speedily drawn out of himself; and began, as all do under such a process, instantly to improve. He answered her when he could, and confessed his state frankly when he could not; and if there had not been a common natural sympathy between them till that moment, it would have existed then; so dearly did she—the child of nature—love to hear such a confession from a man who seemed to her to know so much. It helped, at once, to set her personally at ease; while it satisfied her poet-faith in the wisdom as well as the beauty of modesty in knowledge.

When once the teacher and the pupil had come to a good understanding, there remained little of difficulty for the man and the woman to arrive at a like

result. I have shown what Archy had thought and felt about Mrs. Dell, on his first sight of her, from the height of Norman Mount. And though all subsequent thoughts and feelings were modified by the discovery—for the moment, an exquisitely painful one—that she was married, married to his own friend, Mr. Dell, yet the modification did not prevent a certain dangerous pleasure from being indulged in, that of dwelling, in imagination, on the beauty of soul of the young wife. There could be no harm in that, he thought. On the contrary, there ought to be much good. He wanted to mould himself by the aid of some such spiritual standard. And to do Archy full justice, let me add that not the least taint of personal emotion, or desire, that *he* could recognise or control, mingled with his admiration of Mrs. Dell. He would, for instance, have been only too glad, if by any possible evolution of circumstance it could have been discovered that he and Winny were brother and sister, and that his relations of affection and gratitude with Mr. Dell might have been made permanently secure and sacred by such a tie.

But out of this very purity of thought and intention arose a new danger, that Archy was not philosopher enough to have anticipated. He felt so safe,—and he desired so earnestly to improve himself, and become worthy of the friendship of two such persons as Mr. and Mrs. Dell,—and he saw (he thought) so clearly, that it was mainly through the latter that he would achieve this object, that he lost, by degrees, all instinctive sense of the danger of his position; and as his shyness and taciturnity passed away, he abandoned

himself, at every opportunity, to the full enjoyment of the intercourse with his fair scholar; and then exhibited, in their most attractive aspect, all those qualities of mind and character that had made him a universal favourite among his companions at the University; and which now produced a corresponding effect on the young, earnest, and sympathetic nature of Mrs. Dell.

He soon perceived her regard for him, and with the perception came soberer thoughts. And then, always quick to run in the new direction that circumstances might happen to indicate, he began to fancy he had done wrong, was committing himself further and further on a hopeless and worse than hopeless career; and then the sense of Mr. Dell's generous kindness rushed upon him with irresistible force, and he was almost ready to leave Bletchworth at once, without explanation, and so guard against the possibility of any new and utterly unpardonable offence against his own conscience,—against his every instinct of right and wrong.

But although Archy did right to blame himself for not having kept a more even balance of mind, he wronged himself in his self-inculcation. Never for a single instant had one dishonouring thought, consciously, risen in his mind, without being instantly put down, or banished; but he persisted,—as certain weak people are apt to do—in not seeing danger until the signs of its existence could no longer be gainsaid. Then he went to an opposite extreme, and frightened himself unnecessarily, without at all righting himself in the process. And thus he remained in

a state of perpetual oscillation,—to his own great discomfort,—between snatches of enjoyment that he felt he had no right to, and useless wishes to put an end to them that he had not decision to carry into effect.

Then, as days and weeks passed on, a marked change exhibited itself in his behaviour, in his face, and in the whole tone and temper of his conversation.

Mr. Dell, who had at first greatly enjoyed his companionship, began to complain to his wife, at first laughingly, then with annoyance, then almost with concern, that Archy was losing his tongue, his spirit, almost his good humour. What could be the matter with him? They both agreed that it might be the remembrance of the cruel humiliation he had undergone; aided, possibly, by a reaction, such as these eager fluctuating temperaments are subject to, from the great relief and gratification experienced on his first coming to Bletchworth.

Mr. Dell made several attempts to learn if there was any special trouble to account for Archy's conduct, but could discover none; and also to induce him to speak frankly as to what was the matter with him, but with no better effect. Archy persisted that there was nothing the matter. He was melancholy, he acknowledged; and that was all he could say. "If he did not do his duty properly to Mrs. Dell—"

"Come, come, Archy!" exclaimed Mr. Dell. "If you won't speak, not even to a friend, don't at least punish him for wishing that you would. You have effectually silenced me now."

Archy seemed even more hurt at this than Mr. Dell, —but he allowed the conversation to drop: apparently

not sorry that Mr. Dell *was* effectually silenced. Mr. Dell wondered more than ever, but soon grew tired of that unprofitable process, and went back to his studio, waiting the time when this slight and inexplicable shadow should melt away in the light of common sense and under a healthier atmosphere of mind.

But as Archy and Mr. Dell began to draw apart, Archy and Grace seemed to be more attracted to each other. To him her smile became fairer, her voice more musically pitched than to any one else. Yet Archy never for a moment attributed these pleasant phenomena to a wrong cause, if he did not—could not—dare to connect them with any possible right one. He felt, while with her, that there was a kind of unexpressed, yet perfectly intelligible interchange of sympathy; as though she half-divined what was passing in his heart; and pitied him, and esteemed him the more for his determinedly honourable purpose of making himself as miserable as he could. Yet he treated the supposition as only one of his many day-dreams, which he would have been very sorry to find realised. But one morning, when his eyes were fixed upon Mrs. Dell and were following her lingeringly with a dreamy abstract look, he sighed as he withdrew his gaze, and then he felt the blood rush most irritatingly to his cheek, as he saw that he had been himself just as closely watched by Miss Addersley;—and that, in a word,—she knew as well as he did what had been passing in his thoughts. He would have said, or done something—no matter how absurd—to deny the suggestion of her glance, but he dared not; he knew instinctively he was before an intellect more

piercing than his own, and to him utterly impene-
trable,—a will that was not likely to fail in coping
with his will, which unfortunately had yet only distin-
guished itself by its weakness at one time, and by
its fitful strength at another. Here was a new
difficulty for him—a new toil clinging about him.

But if Grace had made this difficulty, she certainly
did her best to accompany it with all possible compen-
sations. If he ever felt the least wish to be alone
with Mrs. Dell, she seemed to divine his wish, and to
disappear. If, when they were all three together, the
tone of conversation flagged, as it was very natural it
should while Archy thus laboured with his perilous
secret, she was sure to re-animate it, and to make him
practically feel as though he had been battling with
shadows, and needed only to open his eyes, take
things as they might come, and be content: all then
would be well. If there was any little personal
service that Mrs. Dell happened to need, such as the
fetching of a glass of water to refresh her jaded spirits,
Grace, while herself almost ostentatiously ministering
to the young wife's wants, somehow managed to find
Archy in the way, as she approached; and so allowed
him to hand the water to the fair hand that was held
out to receive it; and if Grace did not understand
the thrill with which Archy's hand touched Winny's,
he did:—only too well. In fine, Archy was rolling
down a precipice at a portentous rate; but the sward
was so thickly covered with flowers, and the perfumes
that his descent exhaled from them in the crush were
so deliciously sweet, that he could only roll on.

Grace saw and felt she had done right to wait.

One half her wishes were accomplished ; how now as to the other moiety ? What about Mrs. Dell ?

One morning, about a month after the beginning of the lessons, Archy thought he noticed in Mrs. Dell a change. Her manner was at intervals constrained, and then again more than ordinarily tender and sweet. What thoughts ran through the young teacher's mind I will not undertake to say ; but his senses grew tumultuous, his eye and intellect alike confused, his teachings fruitless, his explanations utterly inexplicable. Mrs. Dell saw, with a heightening colour and a passing shade of gravity, but otherwise took no notice ; and went on with the lessons just as though nothing were amiss. Grace came in on one of her flying usual visits, noticed the increased suffusion on the cheek, and managed, by the steadiness of her own gaze, to give it a deeper tinge. And then, with an inexpressibly sweet tone and smile to Mrs. Dell, the mere overflow of which were sufficient for Archy also, she went out again. And so the lesson passed.

Archy felt instinctively that this morning would not end as other mornings had ended ; although, at the close of the two hours, he rose, mechanically as usual, to put out his hand to wish Mrs. Dell good-morning, but he was stopped by her saying in a somewhat embarrassed voice :

“ Stay, if you please, a few minutes longer.”

He re-seated himself, feeling his heart beat fast, unable to guess what would be coming, yet certain there was something about to be said that would be of no ordinary moment to him.

"Archy!—may I call you so?" said Mrs. Dell, in a sweet but timid tone.

He knew not what to answer—that would have not exposed him in a moment—him and his whole secret; so he bowed.

"Archy, I want to ask you one or two questions, that I dare say will surprise you; but you know my respect, my affection for you."

"Affection!" Did Archy hear correctly? No doubt: but if so, he by no means felt prompted to respond as one might have supposed he would respond to such a word from Mrs. Dell. What was it?—something in the tone, or the manner, or the look that restrained him? He could not tell; but he was effectually restrained. Again he bowed, as the only answer he felt capable of giving.

"Archy, why is it you have been so changed of late?—changed to my husband especially? Why are you so unhappy? Why do you persistently refuse to acknowledge,—what every one who cares about you can see so plainly,—that you are ill at ease, that you do not, cannot rest?"

Tints and hues of all kind appeared and died out, and then again re-appeared, on the face of the listener, during this cross-questioning. He was not prepared for it:—had not expected it. He could have quarrelled with Mr. Dell, if necessary, in order to make him be silent, but there was no such solution practicable here.

"You do not answer me? Come, Archy, I want to be your confessor, and see if I cannot disperse this gloom from your brow. But you must be honest and

frank. Still silent. Must I then—a woman too—lead you on? *Archy, I know your secret.*”

Archy, thunderstruck, looked up. She sat—just opposite to him, all distinct colour banished from her cheek, yet with a certain vivid animation shining through it, her blue eyes filling with tears, and an expression in them, in her countenance, and in her gestures, that showed she was neither angry, nor alarmed, but very—very sad for his sake.

Archy tried to speak—but could not—looked at her again, and saw the same almost divine pity shining forth, and then—knowing not what he did—he threw himself at her feet, and cried out as he snatched her hand—

“I do—God knows—I do, indeed, love you! O pity me!”

In an instant Mrs. Dell sprang to her feet, and her whole aspect underwent an entire revolution. Her eyes almost blazed down, in scathing anger and contempt, upon Archy; her hand, hurriedly withdrawn from his grasp, was raised warningly—almost menacingly; a burning spot appeared on her cheek, and when she spoke, it was in loud, deeply-breathed, measured words:

“Mr. Cairn, if I forgive this, it is for my husband’s sake. Go—we are strangers henceforth.”

She turned, not even again looking upon Archy as he cowered before her, and went right past him to the door; but she paused there, as she touched the handle, hesitated, and then Archy faintly murmured, in a voice broken with anguish—

“You would forgive me, if you knew; but words are useless. Farewell!”

His words decided her. She again changed her purpose, and said—

“Stay, one moment. You hurt me just now as I little thought any friend of my husband, any man I respected, or who respected me, could hurt me; but I will not, for one rash act, forget what I wanted to do, and which I thought—perhaps very foolishly—I alone could do. Will you hear me calmly?”

Again Archy bowed.

“I have seen, then, for some time, and I am sure others have seen too—no, do not mistake me, I do not mean Mr. Dell; he has too much faith in your good sense to allow such a thought to enter into his mind,—I meant Miss Addersley; she has seen, as I have, how you—”

“Mrs. Dell,” said Archy at last, interrupting her with a great effort, “allow me only to tell you this; it is a miserable apology for my weakness—I know that; but perhaps it may slightly modify your thoughts of me to hear it. Do you remember that on the first morning of our meeting here—the morning when I had so terrible a story to relate—you had previously spent some time on Norman’s Mount?” Winny remembered, and coloured to the very eyes, and was, I fear, again growing angry, but that Archy continued—

“I was, through the merest accident, on the very summit when you came; and I was at first withheld by the fear of disturbing you from making my presence known, and then—then—”

Archy could not proceed, unless he might have poured forth, in glowing words, the burning thoughts

that were within ; but Winny understood—what woman would not?—all that the sudden break left unexpressed. Presently Archy continued, evidently struggling with all his might to moderate his emotions and language—

“As I looked on you I fancied it was Miss Addersley who stood before me, and—and I remained under that impression for some hours : hours that were but too eventful for me. When I learned the truth I wrestled with myself, and thought I had conquered, and that the daily and growing pleasure I felt in your society was merely that which everyone would feel—ought to feel, who could understand you, as I did. I know now the difference, and I—believe me—I am sufficiently punished.” Not a word more would Archy say. He felt that he had no right even to play, by means of his own emotions, upon the emotions of the woman before him. And she understood the control he was exercising, and began to recover some of her former respect for him.

“I am glad, Archy, you have told me this, for it removes what would have been always the most painful and inexplicable feature of the case to me—how you could *first* have admitted so dangerous a tenant. But time presses. We must now say at once, and for ever, what remains to be said. You must leave us.”

“Yes, I have already seen that,” replied Archy ; but the mingled depression and resignation of his tone, and the profound melancholy visible in his face as he spoke, touched Winny more than she would have liked to be conscious of, and then insensibly modified, though they could not change, her purpose.

"Archy, you must get over this manfully. I was pleasing myself with the thought that my husband would find in you an attached, faithful friend. I sometimes fancy—this is only to your own ear, and because I want you to think differently of me than you have done, both for your own sake and mine—I sometimes fancy I shall die young; I do not mean just now, or next month, or perhaps next year; but I am sure, Archy, you will never see me a grey-haired woman, and so have to wonder how you could have been so foolish—" but here Archy, instead of smiling, as she had intended he should, at her kindly jest, burst into a passion of tears, and wept audibly; turning away from her, as though he would have gladly gone out of the world before he had heard such painful words, and from one whom *he* dared not attempt to comfort. What little right that way he might have claimed he had just forfeited by his conduct.

And Mrs. Dell wept with him, though still smiling through her tears—still rousing and cheering the unhappy man before her.

"Come, come, Archy, let us have done with this. Perhaps, after all, it is only a morbid delusion of mine; and, perhaps, if I have friends—*true* friends, Archy—" this was said with an accent so full of meaning that it was impossible it could be mistaken—"friends strong enough to keep me here—"

Archy rose,—moved by an impulse that he did not need to control,—came to Mrs. Dell, took her hand, and respectfully kissed it, saying—

"Will you trust me—once more, and for the last time?"

“I will, Archy—as if you were my own dear—dear brother!”

“O, God knows—if you will accept me as a brother, you shall never again be troubled with this—this folly; only do not mistake me if I continue to reverence you as never yet man did reverence a sister. I thought you would save me—felt you would save me, and you have done so, but in a way I little dreamed of. Allow me for the last time to touch this dear hand—sacred to me evermore.” She held it out, and Archy kissed it, and a tear dropped on it;—and at that moment Grace appeared, and was about hurriedly to withdraw in some confusion, real or feigned, but that Mrs. Dell stopped her.

“Grace, if we wished to have any secrets from you, which I don’t think either of us do, we are both alike sure you would make it too difficult for us to succeed. I have seen, dear, your watchful eye many a time upon us; and I have understood how you might—must feel, when you knew what I also knew, and what Mr. Cairn has but now acknowledged—only, however, because I taxed him with it. It is but justice to him to say that. But it is all over now. If my interference has caused him some pain, he forgives me, and justifies me, and repays me by a great sense of relief for the future. He is cured, believe me, even though he may need just a little longer our womanly sympathy and help. You understand, Grace?”

Grace listened, and turned her face away as she did so, that the shadow darkening over the face at last should not be seen, and that she might give

herself time to recal her wandering—almost paralysed—thoughts, before Mrs. Dell or Archy might see or suspect the terrible nature of the blow they were unconsciously inflicting. What to her, just then, was all their idle prattle? She longed to be away—felt she was stifling for air and freedom, but instinctively remembering the future, re-prepared herself to play her part for a brief instant, so said—

“Yes, yes. Of course my anxiety was for him, and I congratulate him, if, indeed, he feels he has conquered.” Then Grace walked away to the window, opened it, looked out for a moment, and when she again drew back from the window and spoke to them, it was merely to say—

“Surely there is thunder in the air! How stifflingly close, for September, everything feels!” And then she tried to look on and to listen with due attention, during the rest of the conversation, but she could not succeed; she saw and heard only as men see and hear when moving about in a trance.

“And now, Archy,” continued Mrs. Dell, “I have news for you. In fact I waited for some such opportunity before speaking to you as I have spoken to-day. I—I thought it would be much better for you to seem to be called away, than—”

Archy could only leave Mrs. Dell to understand for herself as she best might the gratitude he felt for this new proof of her sweet womanly considerateness; and he therefore again bowed his head, and then waited silently for the intelligence she had to communicate.

“Mr. Dell has received a letter from his friend, Mr. Payne Croft, suggesting that you should meet

him at Chatham the day after to-morrow, and stating that he thinks he has got a clue to the discovery and exposure of your enemy, and to the decisive establishment of your innocence. Mr. Dell awaits you on the lawn. Whatever the result, you will find your friends unchanged when you come back. Farewell!"

Mrs. Dell held out her hand, but when he was about to kiss it, she exclaimed—

"No, Archy, take an honest friendly grasp, if you will!"

"God bless you—for ever and ever!"

And the grasp was exchanged—and the meeting and parting was over. Grace had already disappeared; neither Archy nor Mrs. Dell had noticed when or wherefore.

CHAPTER XX.

A DREAM AND AN AWAKENING.

GRACE ADDERSLEY was not what would ordinarily be called a "dreamer," and she would have been the last person to recognise herself in such a description. Yet now, a few words from Mrs. Dell, and one single glance at that lady's face, and from thence to the face of Archy, had told her that she had been dwelling for many weeks together in one of the most consummately aerial structures that ever deluded the fancy of a human being; and that she had done so without the remotest suspicion of the brittleness or fragility of the tenement, or of the sudden crash that would some day envelope her in its ruins.

She knew it now; and that first awakening was itself more like a dream than the actual illusion that was passing away. But when she had left Mrs. Dell and Archy,—had once fairly got outside the door—she started along the corridor with the bound of a wild panther seeking in a paroxysm of hunger for some coveted prey: but she recollected herself before any eye could note the change;—and she was rewarded— for another door opened, and Mr. Dell appeared. He spoke to her jestingly upon some casual topic, and she

answered with a felicity that, in the existing state of her mind, had something truly heroic. But he unconsciously tried her still further. She had, for her own reasons—drawn him into a habit of speaking so unreservedly, that even the topic of all topics,—the one nearest to his heart, and which never far left his heart, except when invited forth by the person more directly concerned, or by his fair cousin,—the traits of his wife's character, had been sometimes the subject of remark and sympathy between them. He could not help, just now, in his quiet, half-unintentional way, describing to her a little incident, that Grace could not afterwards distinctly remember, but which seemed to the fond husband so full of simple beauty and individuality of character, that he dwelt upon it, and seemed to think Grace would also like to dwell upon it, with unusual unction. Grace even bore this: and acquitted herself so thoroughly to his satisfaction, that he left her radiant with pleasure, and glowing with brotherly affection for the friend and cousin whom he now more than ever valued. And again she started off—eager for—almost fiercely demanding solitude. There was, however, to be another interruption:—her mother waited for her in her favourite room, and began her usual personal complaints; which, of late, Grace had listened to with a patience and considerateness strangely at variance with her old habits while she and her mother remained under the sun of South America. But Mrs. Addersley had not come to-day merely to satisfy a selfish personal mood; she had brought with her a rich present, a shawl of almost fabulous value, that she had hoarded up for many a

year, often exhibiting it to her daughter's longing eyes, but never—or rarely—wearing it herself, and always silent about its ultimate disposal.

“Grace, dear, do you know why I have brought this to-day?”

Grace looked—she could not answer—and her fierce expression seemed only to indicate, “How dared her mother of all persons in the world just then stand in her path!” Mrs. Addersley had not seen that look for more than a twelvemonth, and she did not care to recal the scene when she had last witnessed it. But though she felt uncomfortable, she went towards Grace with some little show, perhaps some little reality, of affection—threw the shawl about her shoulders, saying, as she did so—

“There, Grace, it is yours at last! This is your twenty-seventh birthday.

“See, how I thank you for reminding me!” was the daughter's reply, as with gleaming and furious eyes she snatched off the shawl as she might some poisoned garment, threw it on the floor, walked right across it, and left the room.

Poor Mrs. Addersley trembled, but did not dare to resist this treatment. She took up the despised garment, tried to wipe off the faint dust-marks that Grace's feet had stamped there—it seemed indelibly; folded it up with a sigh, went to the window, and there saw Grace descending the external stair, cross below the black cedars, and disappear in the avenue of Grey Ghost Walk. Mrs. Addersley did not feel in the least disposed to follow her, so she went back to her own room and applied herself to her

usual resource for trouble or tedium—fancy needle work.

Grace went down the avenue, with a somewhat quickened step, but with no other external sign that could have led an observer to suppose anything unusual the matter. But her whole manner changed when once she knew she was beyond the range of any eye, or any ear; for Grey Ghost Walk was too straight, and so peculiarly shrouded by trees close at hand, and by high walls a little further off, that a wanderer there might rely upon the most absolute solitude, unless the first glance around showed that others had come previously on a similar quest. Grace, therefore, seeing no one, knew there was no one near; and when she reached a little mound, she dropped upon it, heedless of the undried dew of the grass, or the oozy soil beneath; and tried by shutting her eyes, and pressing her hands to her head, to quell the raging tumult that had broken loose within. In vain! In vain! The bonnet was presently thrown off; the crowning beautiful plaits of hair were clutched at convulsively and set free, and as the tresses flew wildly and sweepingly about in the strong breeze, the arms, half bare—for the sleeves fell low from the shoulders,—rose desperately up towards the sky, tossing to and fro:—and then there was a low laugh, and the form fell back upon the mound at full length, and shook again, again, and again, with that horrible inexplicable mirth.

Not a word did she speak; self-control was yet paramount—but paramount as a sovereign on a day of carnival, when he sees and is obliged to submit to the licence of his own slaves. Presently she got

up, her bonnet unheeded, her hair dishevelled and forgotten, and she walked to and fro, as a beautiful panther might walk that had lost its liberty, and was measuring in succession every one of the bars of its cage to see against which she should make the first desperate rush.

But she does not find what she seeks, physical relief: relief from the swelling, suffocating, maddening sensation about the throat, that stops all thought, and drives her, consciously, to what must be a ruinous exposure. Her blood is boiling like a dammed up stream just broken away from the mountain heights, and which can find no quiet passage, but chafes, and whitens, and circles, and rages, uselessly, among the black, jagged, immoveable wall of rocks. To and fro, minute after minute, for a length of time that she is utterly unable to measure, she thus paces; until she fancies herself better, calmer, and then she again drops down upon the damp sward, hoping to think.

And thought does come back to her. She hurriedly feels for something in her pocket, and the strong, quivering, restless hands, which now seem animated by an almost independent life, presently bring forth a little morocco case. They open it slowly, as with a sense of some kind of pleasure once more beginning to grow; and with a sinister light upon that half-beautiful, half-devilish face. The case is unclosed, and two cards are drawn forth, photographic portraits of a man and a woman. It is needless to ask whose portraits they are. Their present owner had begged them in one of her demonstrative moods of affection for her cousin, and for his wife,—Grace's own dear,

dear friend ! Aye, and she does now value them more than ever. She places one, the man's, upon the grass, carefully, and with a sort of wilful tenderness ; she then holds the other before her, and gazes at it, longingly, clingingly, frenziedly, till the beholder's own excited eyes begin to fancy they see the presentment shrink from them as the original had shrunk, on that memorable day in the studio ; when, under cover of the personification of the ballad for the benefit of the painter, she had been able, for a single instant, a precious one, to let forth, before both husband and wife, the real feelings that animated her.

And still she gazes upon the portrait of Mrs. Dell with a reckless abandonment of herself to all the furious passions that possess her, and which, as they mingle and concentrate, change into one burning irresistible stream of the deadliest hate. The sight of the portrait seems to break the long spell of silence ; and Grace murmurs to herself, in tones now seeming to be as deep almost as an organ-voice in their rich profundity, and now, so high, harsh, and utterly unlike their ordinary flute-like music, that Grace would listen to them appalled, were she just now capable of playing the part of a calm self-observer.

“ So : it was then the dream of an idiot after all ! And it is she—herself—who came to waken me, and I have not thanked her—but I do thank her !—aye, in my innermost soul ! Couldst thou but know how much !

“ I have failed egregiously—no doubt of that ! Perhaps she knows it too, and in her condescending playfulness, does not wish unnecessarily to provoke

me by the display of her triumph ; she might think me dangerous perhaps ? Why dangerous ? Look on me ! Answer if thou canst ! Why dangerous ? Did I suggest danger ? Revel ! Love ! Write ! Win him more and more ! Win the world if thou canst ! But beware that no conqueror steals in at the last hour to brush thee aside with a laugh, and take possession of all thy hardly earned fruits ! Thou art warned ! Beware ! He was mine—shall be mine again ! Let this kiss which I give him, before thee, burn into thy soul, in pledge of the truthfulness of my words. Again—and again ! May it burn into thee, as the sight of thy hangings about him—thy detestable caresses have seared and eaten their way into my heart !

“ O, this is well ! I to threaten ! I !—the puniest warrior that ever fancied it had enveloped itself in irresistible mail ! I who have dreamed of triumph and success, while walking mincingly and simpering along the beaten way to the most ludicrous failure that ever rewarded, as it deserved to be rewarded, the folly of idiotic self-conceit. I have woven at the toil night and day, my tools and my enemies have walked into it just to amuse me, poor child !—have waited for me to give the signal at my own time, and when they move at last, it is I alone who am enmeshed, and who might have been—who deserved to be—the sport of all mankind ! But no, no, they have kindly spared me that exposure, and I will reward them. Smile your last, fair one ; look round on the world and on the beauty that bewitches you ; sigh as you often do sigh, I will be merciful and not laugh the while ; but quick, have done with this

leave-taking. There! there! there!" and as she spake, each word seeming like a blow upon the sward, she tore the photograph bit by bit; and then hunted hungrily for the largest pieces, that she might again tear them: still retaining the whole in her hand. And then she rose, and seemed about to scatter the fragments on high, that the breeze, which had been growing for some time in sound and power, might disperse them whither it pleased, if only it bore them from her loathing sight.

But ever guarded in her worst moments by an instinctive caution, she repressed the impulse, when only a few morsels had escaped; and she sought for these with a strange patience and pertinacity, saying to herself the while,—

"One bit might tell the tale." She soon regained them; and then, with a small ivory paper-cutter, the only instrument she could find, she tore up a tuft of grass, and began digging eagerly in the dank soil below. When she had thrown out several handfuls of the earth, she paused, and began to drop the bits of card, one by one, from as high a point as she found allowed them to fall accurately into the cavity. While thus engaged, she again muttered to herself—

"Why does that priestly mummerly come into my thoughts now—'Ashes to ashes! Dust to dust!'—Well, she may, perhaps, like it, and sleep more comfortably in consequence!" And thus she dropped the whole into the place she had excavated; and when she had finished, she looked round to see that no piece had escaped her; and she fetched some twigs, and fastened them across the little white heap,

so that no movement of the tuft above should disturb them; and then she covered the twigs with soil and pressed it down with her closed and jewelled hand, harder and harder, while she gazed furtively round to be sure she was still alone. And then she threw in more soil in a loose state to receive the roots of the tuft she had torn away, and which she now replaced; and after that she brushed off with her handkerchief the light particles of mould that clung to the blades of grass until they all looked as fresh, green, and unsullied as the rest. Then she sat a moment, further removed, to look at the tuft, and to judge if it appeared different from the surrounding surface; and she did not feel quite satisfied until she had risen, walked away, and returned to cast a 'casual' glance (that was her idea) on the spot. And then she smiled in self-consciousness; a low sinister smile it was; and it said, "I am myself once more—Grace Addersley." And now the pacing to and fro recommenced, though in a less excited manner than before. And the tones became more even, though still there lurked a painful dissonance amid all their honey-music.

"I have failed—she has succeeded—is succeeding still—meditates greater successes. Yet she is very inconsistent—pity no true friend tells her so! Why in all this earthly delight she has—and this immortal glory she prepares for—why does she weakly seek to win pity for her odd fancies? Why, does she think, as she has more than once said, she shall die early? These are not fitting tools to play with, Mrs. Dell: believe me, they are not. Die early! what a strange

fancy for so young a creature! Poor thing! She lacks experience, she tells me. It is so hard, she says, for a woman, in these conventional days, to realise what life is, and what it is capable of. Would she thank me to teach her, I wonder!" She paused, looked round in every direction, then let her thoughts return in silence to her. And she was long immovable—looking at that little tuft; and when at last she roused herself, she glanced about with a strange uneasiness, as though roused with an idea that thoughts themselves—unspoken thoughts—might possibly be heard by some species of living things. Her flesh crept for an instant as she fancied she caught the rustle of invisible forms passing and touching her. But she laughed as she recollected herself.

And then she took out her watch—stared a moment incredulously at the hands—put it to her ear—and said,—

"Is it possible! Well—it is for the last time; no more self-forgetfulness now!" And then, having no glass, she arranged her hair with an elaborate carefulness—re-crowning herself with those fair, soft, light-hued plaits as though she were a queen, about to receive, or be presented to, some mighty potentate; and she felt her face all over with her hands; but again laughed at the absurdity of attempting thus to discover how she looked: besides, she felt sufficiently within her that which told of the deadly whiteness that must be covering her without;—so she resolved that no one should see her until she had regained her colour, quiet, and elasticity, in her own room.

Peace had come—such as it was. Once more she

felt able to do whatever her spirit resolved on; and before she reached the end of the Walk and was advancing below the cedars, she felt the blood had come back to her cheek. Then she heard Mr. Dell call to her from the lawn, but she appeared not to hear; and got out of his sight as speedily as she could. She ascended the winding stairs with a stealthy step, such as she had never before known; and looked with a kind of fascination on the green tufts between the cracks of the stones as she passed; for each seemed so like the one tuft she had just left behind.

CHAPTER XXI.

ANOTHER VIEW FROM NORMAN'S MOUNT.

IF Grace had stopped when called to, as she passed from the seclusion of Grey Ghost Walk back towards her own chamber, she would have noticed that Archy was with Mr. Dell on the lawn, and have learned that both were desirous to consult with her on the letter that had just been received from Mr. Payne Croft. As to Archy, he had a still stronger secret motive: he yearned to say a word—or if that were impossible, to give the word's equivalent in a look, or a pressure of the hand that might intimate to Grace that Mrs. Dell had spoken truly,—he was cured. He thought she would not only be glad herself to know that he had thoroughly righted himself, but that she would make Mrs. Dell know it too! He wanted them both to feel satisfied that when he returned to Bletchworth after the journey he was about to take, they might dismiss all fears of him, and that all might meet under less restraint than would otherwise be possible. It was in effect an impulse of gratitude: and Archy was grieved, as Grace disappeared from their view, that he was unable to acknowledge to her the debt he owed.

But if Grace had known of his wishes, and had

given him an honest answer, it would have been to ask, who was he,—a stranger,—to appeal to her thus! Her interest in him was as absolutely dead as if it had never existed. Already a whole lifetime of emotion seemed to divide her from the state of mind that had alone caused her to think about him, his story and career, his character and wishes.

Archy, however, remained in happy ignorance of the change, and continued therefore during his chat with Mr. Dell, to look wistfully from moment to moment toward the spot where he had seen her cross, hoping she would again appear before them.

Yes, he was undoubtedly cured. Mrs. Dell, by her decision, frankness, and sympathy, had called forth all his better qualities, and shamed away the worse. Archy dated from this exquisitely painful, but most wholesome hour of discipline, the beginning of a true manly life at last. He began now to work at realities; and to give up the unprofitable business of aërial castle-building.

Mr. Dell saw the change, though fortunately for Archy’s future peace of mind, he had no suspicion of the cause. He attributed the young man’s reviving spirits to the receipt of the letter, and to the prospect it opened of re-establishing his character; and he believed, not altogether incorrectly, that Archy’s overflow of grateful feeling was intended as an acknowledgment that he had of late somewhat forgotten the friendly ties that bound them. So, in losing his friend for a few days, Mr. Dell was very glad to think he had probably recovered him for a lifetime.

Archy held the letter in his hand, and looked at it again and again, as they wandered about, putting occasionally a question concerning it.

“May I ask who this Mr. Payne Croft is, who writes so kindly about me?”

“A rising barrister on the Western Circuit, and an old friend of mine. But, between ourselves, Archy, I will acknowledge to you my suspicion, that it is not at all to please you, and only in a very moderate degree is it to please me, that Mr. Payne Croft goes out of his way to make you this offer.”

“Indeed! you surprise me.”

“Very likely. Archy, don’t let my whisper be again whispered further on, or you’ll plunge me into a pretty mess with the ladies. Payne Croft was much struck with my cousin; and though I suspect he has said nothing, for he is a sly, cautious fellow, who won’t speak till the very hour of doom comes, yet I see in this letter, evidence of a latent desire to keep open his connection with Bletchworth.”

Mr. Dell looked at Archy, and gave a pleasant, low cheery laugh, as he glanced in the direction of Grace’s room; and then he sauntered with him along the white shell-covered paths of the lawn, pausing occasionally to enjoy the fragrance or the beauty of a tall standard rose, or to luxuriate, with a painter’s eye, on the glowing and harmonious tints of the varying beds of flowers.

“Let’s see,” he continued, while critically scanning a magnificent blossom of a newly-opened yellow Persian rose, “where is it he says he will meet you at Chatham?”

"At a little public-house, close by the one that I used occasionally to frequent, and which was called the 'Jolly Soldier.'"

"And you say the Sergeant sometimes visited the 'Jolly Soldier' also?"

"Yes, after he first met with me there, and began to draw me into talk."

"Then the clue that Payne Croft thinks he has got, seems to lead him alike to the 'Jolly Soldier,' and to the Sergeant. Well, success to your joint-campaign. Keep close,—away from the 'Jolly Soldier,' mind,—as he bids you, till you understand his game. Ferret the vagabond out—but don't unnecessarily rip up the past and very painful story. The best thing for you would be, that the innocence of Martin Todd should be openly acknowledged, and no one know or care for the result to Archibald Cairn. And, failing that, the next desirable thing would be for you to obtain some real, though not open, proof of your innocence, which might be forthcoming at any future time, and be unquestionable when produced in the event of any hostile attack being made upon you—grounded upon the old misfortune. But in this noble society of ours, there is such a damaging influence often exerted by a fact—through its mere existence,—I mean a fact that every one acknowledges to be clear and unimpeachable as to its moral harmlessness, but which almost every one at the same time shrinks from too closely associating with, in their own proper persons and interests,—that I advise you strongly not to be too chivalrous in your self-assertion. Don't throw aside unnecessarily the shield that your fictitious name has given you!

Don't insist fanatically in the person of Archibald Cairn for the right of remedying the wrongs done to Martin Todd. Be guided in all such matters by Payne Croft. And indeed, for that matter, you must: I promise you he won't be played with or dictated to. Once in his hand, you must let him guide all. But you may trust him: especially in this,—he will do as much as any lawyer possibly can do in his professional capacity to understand and to be considerate of the feelings of a gentleman; while fighting his battle with all the weapons that his legal lore has enabled him to accumulate, and with all the practised skill of fence that experience and love of his vocation have gradually taught. I like Payne Croft—for a lawyer! And you will like him too—if you don't forget my qualification."

"And—and—as to Mrs. Dell's lessons in my absence?"

"O, a little rest will do her good. By the bye, Archy, did you ever wonder why I didn't myself undertake that task?" As Archy *had* wondered, he couldn't help saying so, thus challenged.

A half-blush rose to Mr. Dell's face—and he was not so successful as he wished to be in trying to carry it off by a cough,—as though something were troubling him in his throat,—an insect, or a bit of the rose-petal that he had been dallying with on his tongue. So he said with a smile,—

"Well then, I'll tell you. I knew very well that I should only make-believe if I attempted it," and there he stopped, and said no more. But Archy, understood perfectly well how easy it was to be making

believe to give lessons to Mrs. Dell; and didn't need to wait for further confidences, which he could neither desire to receive, and which certainly Mr. Dell would be the last man to bestow. In truth, the latter would not have spoken at all, but for a sort of uneasy impression that people—at home—must wonder that he, who was so well fitted to impart to Winny the knowledge she most needed, did not accept the duty. It may even be owned that there was a kind of excusable selfishness in his wish to enjoy uninterruptedly with his wife the delight of a free communion with her intellect as well as with her heart, and to leave to others the details of furnishing that intellect with needful aids. But if that feeling was blameable, it sprang from the one blameable part of Mr. Dell's character, a thirst for enjoyment, which too strongly modified his willingness to labour; a keener sense of the wealth and vividness of life, than of life's responsibilities; a more active participation in the instincts of affection, than in the logical duties that naturally pertain to them, or grow out of them.

But that little question and explanation has done more than relieve Mr. Dell's mind from a slight embarrassment; it has tested Archy, and found him worthier than before. He has found he can take a real interest in the husband's love for his wife,—a love that has been now so unwillingly and unobtrusively—even while so frankly—acknowledged to him; and though he feels and believes—perhaps rightly—that he shall never look upon any other woman in the years to come as he had looked upon Mrs. Dell, yet he also feels, and partly acknowledges to himself, that

life is not to be treated as the mere arid desert henceforth that he has been anticipating: that there are yet precious friendships to cultivate, noble duties to be fulfilled, and a mother—too long forgotten—to be re-instated in her old faith in her son. And Archy, reviewing all this, begins to yearn for work—for domestic peace—and to know that he has turned his back for ever upon temptation.

Does Mr. Dell, with that quick penetrating glance of his, which always seems to be able to slide under the edges of everybody's facial mask, and scan the exact state of things below,—does he know what has been, or does he guess what may be, passing in the secret chambers of Archy's heart? It looks very like it, for just when the latter holds out his hand to say 'Good bye,' Mr. Dell observes,

"O, well remembered, Archy! When you come back I want to talk to you about a project I have in view. Norman-Mount farm will be vacant at Christmas. I want you to look out for a good tenant for me."

"Yes, with pleasure!" answered Archy, but somewhat abstractedly, for he could not help asking himself, "Did Mr. Dell remember that he, Archy, had often said to him, in days gone by, that if he had not so early in life been urged on by his parents to be a student, or if—in spite of that—he had possessed capital, he would, after his father's death, both for his mother's sake and on account of his own love of rural life, have turned farmer? Nay, that he had said to Mr. Dell, then only the heir to Norman-Mount not its owner, as they stood on the height, and looked

down over the farm—"And that's the place I would have!" Had Mr. Dell forgotten this? Most likely. But Archy had not. While education had been the business of his life, gardening and farming, in a small amateur way, had been his hobby: and his skill and scientific knowledge had more than once been noticed by the great agriculturist of the neighbourhood, Mr. Staunton. But Archy sighed now as he reflected, that such a farm would need capital, even if Mr. Dell were inclined to trust him with it as his tenant.

"I suppose, Archy, your own tastes don't incline that way?"

"They might—if it were of any use—if, for instance, I had a thousand pounds or so to speculate with."

"What if you were to manage it for me, for a year or two, just to see how you get on? You couldn't hurt me much, if you failed; while if you succeeded, I should have secured a trusty tenant."

"You mean—?"

"That I would in that case let you rent the whole."

"But the capital?"

"The capital is in it, and there needs no more. I should make you pay me good interest, till you could pay me off."

Archy dared not trust his ears, they must be deceiving him! Still less could he venture to raise his eyes to Mr. Dell's face, remembering the recent scene with his wife; so he only murmured in a broken voice, which he vainly tried to steady, as he gazed on the ground,—

"Wait till this matter is cleared up—till—till—"

you have seen me more practically deserving of your goodness, he would have said,—but could only advance half way through the sentence. But he thought of his mother, and how he might repay her for all she had suffered if such an arrangement could be carried out! But he was—himself—sick of mere words, promises; and he felt the necessity of growing more chary of, that he might give more truth to, his demonstrative gratitude. Again he yearned to be at work—to be realising something—to be able to look back, and see that he had worked! Ah yes, from that eminence—once reached—he might venture to hope for, to build upon, to enjoy, a future! At last he said, in a tone and manner implying at once so much more dignity and self-restraint than Mr. Dell had ever before noticed in him that it arrested his attention by its novelty,—

“Mr. Dell, I cannot now thank you for this properly. And I do not, for many reasons, feel justified, at present, either in accepting your offer or in holding you in the least degree bound to it hereafter. But if, when I return, and have had time for mature deliberation, and have consulted my mother, I should conscientiously feel myself able to undertake the farm, and you would permit me to say so—”

“But are you sure you would like it?”

“I do not think there is one other thing in the world to get bread by that I should like so well!”

“That’s enough, Off then to Chatham. And success to you when you get there!”

CHAPTER XXII.

UNKENNELLING THE FOX.

SHALL I tell the impatient reader—if such a one now turns these pages,—why I have dwelt so long upon the details of Archy's mind and fortune, while mightier issues wait for development? It is, then, that I think the world is too often impatient, too often selfish in its dealings with men whom it calls "weak." If there be one principle more than another rife with the seeds of moral evil, social strife, and spiritual atheism, it is that principle which runs like a poisonous underground river below the whole fabric of our civilisation, and which says,—not in words, it is too cunning for that, but in acts, and in theories which justify and stimulate the acts,—that strength was given the strong to prey upon and profit by the weak; that weakness was permitted to ensure an ample supply of legitimate victims for the strong. It is only wonderful,—and it shows how the natural instincts may be corrupted by long misuse,—that men can ever conceal from themselves the inherent baseness of such a creed, or the terrible lengths to which they have permitted it to be carried. Nobleness, generosity, self-sacrifice, human brotherhood, or to sum up all in one word, Christianity—are these indeed but empty

names?—or worse, the tinkling cymbals with which some enthusiast, from time to time, charms and deludes himself while simply amusing the more cunning world? Are there really tracts of life in which it is good to do good, and yet other tracts in which it is good to do evil? May we determinedly pursue our own interests without a moment's care as to how our actions will affect the interests of others—and may we, at the same time legitimately insist—This is civilisation—this is love,—this is the true meaning of the Divine Master! Woe to him who dares to say otherwise?

It cannot be denied that Archy has shown great, frequent, and what many minds must think hopeless weakness. Undoubtedly it would have been hopeless, if those around him had only thought so too: that belief would have effectually despatched him. But Mrs. Dell was not one of those cast-iron legislators of society, neither was Mr. Dell. They might have failed, and so have suffered a disappointment that more prudent people would have taken care to shun; they may fail yet,—and if so, must find consolation from the knowledge that the failure is not due to them, has happened in spite of them. But if they are successful, let their practical creed,—which springs from their hearts, but is defended by their heads, and sanctioned by an old-fashioned homily called “The Sermon on the Mount,”—have the full benefit of the success.

On the appointed day, and at the hour indicated in the letter, Archy walked into the little back parlour of the ‘Barley Mow’ at Chatham, which was



situated about a hundred yards or so from "The Jolly Soldier." Strangely nervous and uncomfortable he felt. He trusted however that no one would recognise him; and he looked so different now—so quiet, unassuming, and gentlemanly to what he had looked as the gloomy, haggard, discontented soldier in his private's dress, that it would not have been easy for any one who had not had a tolerably intimate acquaintance with Martin Todd to identify him in his present dress and appearance, which had all the effect of a disguise.

As he entered the room, he saw a gentleman, not very young, with an acute, deeply-lined face, brilliant eye, and rather close cut hair, busily engaged writing at a table. He looked up, on hearing the door opened, and said, scarcely stopping his pen,—

"You are—"

"Mr. Cairn."

"Thought so. All right. Sit down."

And he went on writing, and for awhile took no more notice of Archy; who on his part supposed he saw Mr. Payne Croft, but could not be at all sure. As Archy watched he was reminded of Chaucer's lines—

"Owhere* a busier man than he there n' as,†
And yet he seemèd busier than he was."

Not the least trace of the gentleman who was so shy and so reserved among the ladies of Mr. Dell's party was here visible. Like Helen McGregor,

* *Owhere*, anywhere. Tyrrwhit gives it as nowhere, which makes nonsense of the passage.

† *N' as*, ne was, or was not.

Payne Croft had now got his foot on his native soil—business—and he was self-possessed, imposing, and consequential. When he had at last finished his occupation of letter-writing, and closed up and stamped some eight or ten letters, and put them in his pocket ready for the post, he began to speak a little more freely, and with something like a smile; and then,—to Archy's surprise, who had felt rather qualmish at his treatment,—came to him, held out his hand, and gave Archy a cordial grasp.

“I'm a busy man you see. Couldn't have come here but that I knew I could manage my own affairs and yours at the same time. Very glad to see you: now to work: read that.” And so saying, he put into Archy's hand what appeared to be a scrap cut from a newspaper.

Archy read, and, need I say, read with the greatest surprise and alarm—if it be remembered how all the sensitiveness natural to his character had been revived and stimulated by his recent life at Bletchworth,—

“We are informed that — —, a young soldier, who was drummed out of his regiment at the — — barracks, for general bad conduct, including a case of theft, is collecting proofs of his innocence, which at the same time implicate a non-commissioned officer of the regiment. It is said, though we cannot pretend to decide with what truth till we know more of the evidence which it seems is about to be laid before the proper authorities—that the officer in question had tried to make use of the young man's ability as a penman for dishonest purposes, and when he found the latter resist, had trumped up the story of

the theft, to get him turned out of the regiment with disgrace: an attempt in which it seems he only too well succeeded. We shall watch the *denouement* with some interest, and let our readers know the result."

"And this has appeared in print—publicly?" faltered Archy.

"Yes, I wrote it myself, and got it sent to a small local paper that was apparently languishing for want of news. This was news, I take it?"

Archy stared, and said to himself—"News indeed! What!—expose everything thus to the enemy at the outset!" Mr. Payne Croft looked at him a moment with the sort of placid enjoyment that he always felt in looking through half-shut, but only therefore the more self-concentrating, eyes, on those whom his tactics alarmed; but time was precious, so he rapidly cut short all Archy's wonderings by a word or two of explanation:—

"There are two men, here, whom I want specially to influence—the man who lost the sovereign that you were charged with stealing, and whom I have already seen for a minute or two; and the Pay-Sergeant, to whom you believe you owe all your trouble. I sent a copy of that paragraph to both, as from a friend, with a request for a meeting."

"Yes?" said Archy, assentingly, but also inquiringly.

"Both men, I hope, are coming to see me this morning. I haven't many hours to spare, and am determined to get to the bottom of the business while I stay."

"Both coming here?"

“No, no; that would be bad generalship. The Sergeant looks for me at ‘The Jolly Soldier,’ and as to the other—Oh, here he comes: mind, I suspect he *can* speak—but won’t: dreading a fate like your own. Hush!” Mr. Payne Croft ceased: a soldier entered, looked uneasily round for a moment, and, seeing Archy, was about to retreat, but that Mr. Payne Croft’s laugh stopped him.

“Why, don’t you know your old comrade—Martin Todd? Todd hasn’t forgotten you, I see. Don’t be afraid, man—he isn’t too genteel, though he looks so, to shake hands with a brother soldier.” Archy could not, for the life of him, tell what to make of all this; but he fancied Mr. Payne Croft wished him to appear cordial to the fellow, so he advanced, holding out his hand and saying—

“Why, Morgan, is that really you?” Morgan in a sullen, stupid sort of way, allowed his hand to be taken, but said nothing, and sat down in a dark corner. He there waited to hear what Mr. Payne Croft had to say. That gentleman first addressed himself to Archy.

“When I came here, yesterday, I sent a copy of that newspaper cutting to our friend here, and told him that he would see from the paragraph that an important movement was going on, but that before it affected him I wished to learn whether he was—what you said you believed him to be—an honest man, and no party to the fraud that had been committed. I asked him therefore to meet us here, and I added—but that, I dare say, did not at all influence him in coming—that while we might be

severe in dealing with one state of things, we should be inclined to be liberal—even in a pecuniary sense—under another. Do you sanction my words, thus far, Mr. Todd ? ”

“ Oh, certainly, certainly,” said Archy, beginning to enter into the spirit of the proceedings, though really suspecting—almost fearing—that the clue that had been talked of in Payne Croft’s letter was simply Mr. Payne Croft’s confidence in his own power to unravel any mystery, however intricate.

“ Very well. Now then, Morgan, rattle along. I must be at Exeter to-morrow, unless I return, to-night, a brief that enclosed a cheque for fifty guineas. If one goes back, ’tother must go too. Understand ? ”

Morgan grinned. The conversation was getting within his range, and his somewhat dull imagination began to intimate to him that this must be no ordinary man. “ Who then was Todd ? Why of course he was what he had always suspected him to be ;—yes, he must be a gentleman ! ”

Mr. Payne Croft watched every movement of the man’s eye, and could measure almost as accurately every thought of the man’s mind. “ Come, we’ll have no secrets, Todd, with an honest fellow like this. Confess you have been sowing a few uncommonly strong wild oats, and that he, Morgan, had the luck to be a witness (for it was luck, if he knew his own interests) of the final part of the process. Well, I’ll speak for you, if you’re shy. Recognise then, Morgan, in Martin Todd, a gentleman ; and the son of an old officer, of some rank in the army. Know further, that he now comes here to clear up a very

ugly bit of business, with or without your help. See,"—and he took out his watch—"I'll spare you ten minutes, and then, if we haven't come to conclusions, we'll stop. And look yet again: I put on the table here ten sovereigns. At the end of the ten minutes they shall be yours if you'll honestly earn them. What say you? A sovereign a minute! That's good pay, I hope? I wish my calling were as lucrative!"

"What do you want me to do?" at last said the man, slowly measuring out his words.

"Answer a few questions."

"Yes—and so get myself into trouble—as he did." Morgan stopped and pointed to Archy.

"Oho, are you there; all right!" thought Mr. Payne Croft, as he said gravely—

"I give you my word of honour, that if you are not yourself the rascal that—"

"And if I were, d'ye think I'd tell you?" grinned the man.

"Your observation is just, and shows a profounder knowledge of human nature than I had expected. I stand rebuked. But go on. The minutes fly, and I shall dock off a sovereign for every one added to the ten." Morgan grinned again at the gentleman's "joke"—but thought on the whole, perhaps, he had best make haste.

"Put your questions, and I'll please myself whether I'll answer 'em."

"What about the sovereign, then, that you—that—you—said you lost?"

"I did lose it."

"Aye, but—" what Mr. Payne Croft could have said, had he been compelled to go on, who shall reveal? He took care, however, not to go on; and his mysterious manner, mingled with the newspaper paragraph, settled the business, and brought forth the precious secret.

"Well, as I see you've got some inkling—"

"Inkling? Eh, Todd? What do you say?" chuckled Mr. Payne Croft, loudly to Archy, who was astounded at Mr. Payne Croft's ease, audacity, and probable success; but who, of course, answered the appeal to him in a correspondingly knowing manner. He shook his head, and appeared to reprove the barrister's inclination to repose confidence prematurely in Morgan, by saying aside to him, in an under tone, that Morgan could perfectly well hear—

"The less we appear to know just yet the better. Perhaps he can really tell us nothing worth the paying for." And then he walked away, as though he had merely dropped some passing and unimportant observation. But Morgan not only heard, but fancied the golden vision was growing dim, and he suddenly blurted out—

"I did lose the sovereign for several weeks, and I could have staked my life it was gone—altogether—till it turned up several weeks afterwards."

"You mean after Todd's sentence and punishment?"

"Yes, I found it in an old pair of trowsers. It had slipped through a little hole, and got down the lining to the bottom. And that's how I missed it."

"Yes, yes—but of course we know all this; we

want to clear up about the other sovereign. Who could have put that where it was found?"

"It wasn't me."

"No," interposed Archy; "I said so at the first."

"You did, I acknowledge it, Mr. Todd; but be so good as to leave the case in my hand. It's a ticklish one yet. We didn't come here to learn that you were an innocent man. Your friends, of course, laugh at the idea of your stealing a sovereign; why Morgan himself smiles at it. But the minutes are going fast—and the sovereigns are vanishing faster still. Eh, Morgan?"

"What the h— do you want more?"—angrily exclaimed the soldier, who didn't understand this apparent failure upon the golden heap. He was losing his temper, and he hadn't much of that to spare at the best of times. He thought he had done all that could be reasonably expected from him to ensure Archy's success, and his own.

"We want to know who you think it was that put the other sovereign there—"

"Then I shan't tell you."

"You own then that you suspect?"

"Suspecting isn't knowing—and it isn't talking." And the man became doggedly silent.

"Come, I know who you suspect—and I know why you don't like to commit yourself to saying anything about him. But suppose we were in possession of proofs sufficient to ruin that man, and to prevent his injuring you or any body else in the regiment, as he injured my young friend? What then?"

"What then?" repeated the soldier, with a sly

twinkle for once illumining the dull inexpressive eye,—“ah, then, I should say, if you've got such capital proofs—use 'em!”

“Very good! very true. Here, take half of the golden ten, in acknowledgment from me—that I was caught—fairly caught. That's for your wit, mind, and good-humour; not for your evidence. Like the round, heavy feel? Come, if you can but give me a lift, I'll forget those five—treat them as part of a fancy transaction, past and gone, and which left the business affair still to come on. See, the ten yet remain to be won! What's the old saw? —‘None but the brave deserve the fair!’ Arn't these very fair, all fresh from the new coinage? By the bye, Morgan, did you spend both those sovereigns? That was dangerous, if you did.”

“But I did 'nt,—I've got 'em still.”

“About you?”

“Yes.”

“Let's look at them.” In an instant the lawyer's eye saw that both, though looking equally bright and new, were divided by several years in their dates of coinage; and that one of them must have been very recently issued—being of the current year. He went on,—“Can you tell me to a certainty which of these two was your own?”

“Yes, I marked it when I found it in my trousers' lining, for I was bothered by the two; and I thought I would like to know one from the other in case of trouble.” The one that had been temporarily lost, was, as the barrister anticipated it would be, the older one. If, now, he could trace the course of the other

into the Sergeant's hands exclusively,—but that seemed hopeless; yes, and the more he weighed the difficulties, the more hopeless the task appeared. He must try a different tack. And already his own shrewd forethought began to produce some of its natural and anticipated consequences. He noticed that the door, which had already been more than once opened by the landlord, a little, shrinking man, who just showed his thin, anxious face, and disappeared with an apologetic gesture as he met Mr. Payne Croft's inquiring eye, was again gently unclosed. Some one,—perhaps the landlord,—was listening outside, or doing something that it behoved the inmates to attend to. Taking up a paper, Mr. Payne Croft appeared to read in it,—and while thus engaged, he saw by a side glance that Morgan was looking toward the unseen person,—and receiving some signal. In an instant, and before any one could have obtained, by sign or sound, the least intimation of his purpose, the barrister was at the door, saw the landlord beckoning eagerly to Morgan, collared him, and dragged him into the room, to the astonishment of all present.

“Now then, say what you have to say like a man! We are all friends here—we have no secrets from each other.”

The landlord looked about him in alarm, and evidently meditated a return to the passage.

“Come, you've a message for one of us—eh?”

“Ye—yes.”

“Yes, I know,—to Morgan,—isn't it?”

“Ye—yes.”

“And from Sergeant Dunk?”

"Yes."

"Come, don't make me do all the work,—he wants—"

"To—to speak a word to Bill Morgan."

"But he's not in a hurry, is he?"

"Well,—yes,—he said he was."

"O, very well. We've done with him. Say our business is finished. He shall come in a minute. Landlords shouldn't set a bad example, and appear to be listening. Excuse my mistake. I'll make all right with you before I go." With bows, smiles, and eager apologies, the landlord went away, and Morgan prepared to follow him. But Mr. Payne Croft objected to that part of the business.

"You see, my friend, business on the whole advances,—though time advances too, with frightful rapidity. You have owned, I think, and I have carefully noted in writing your words, for I valued them very much,—that you never did really lose a sovereign at all. Yet you are aware that Martin Todd was, in effect, punished for stealing one from you. You couldn't help that, you'll say. No, not at the time, I own. But, why did you keep what didn't belong to you,—I mean that other sovereign? And why didn't you inform your Captain, or some superior officer, that this young gentleman had been unjustly punished, when you discovered the mistake?"

"I did tell Sergeant Dunk."

"Oho! you did tell him! come, come, that alters the case, Mr. Morgan. I see now Mr. Todd was right; you are an honest man! And what did he say?"

"Wouldn't believe me at first; and got very angry

and swore at me, and blasted me for a fool. Hadn't he asked me over and over again to look in my pockets, and to look everywhere before I got so d—d positive and certain? I own I was very positive, but I couldn't help asking him why he cared so much about my mistake? I didn't know he had so much love for the youth!—and then he settled down very fast. And when I persisted in knowing what I was to do about the sovereign that didn't belong to me, he said it was no use troubling about the matter now; Martin Todd was a false name, and the bearer of it being really unknown would keep quiet for his own sake. That's how he talked."

"A false name, Todd, what could he mean by that?" asked the barrister very gravely, and looking with arching eyebrows, and such an air of innocence at his client, that the latter would have laughed out if he had dared, and if he had not felt too keenly how much was depending upon his due support of Mr. Payne Croft. So he simply replied with an appearance of equal surprise—

"My name not Todd! What on earth is it, then?"

"O," continued Morgan, "that was just what he said to me; and when I asked him a third time, what I had best do with the sovereign, he said—'keep it—spend it—I would!' But I was always uncomfortable about the affair, and determined to myself I wouldn't do anything of the kind. I didn't know but he'd be coming down upon me afterwards."

"I see, Morgan, you are a 'cute chap; O, anybody can see that! but what shall you say if the Sergeant

is now coming to ask—it mayn't be his first question of course—we all understand any amount of preliminary humbug; but what shall you say if his business is to ask you to give him back that sovereign, or to ask you to let him look at it, or to do something or other that will enable him to handle it, if but for a minute?"

"I shall say then, what I say now—nothing!" But Morgan looked, and grinned, and put his finger to his nose, in intimation of his entire comprehension of the question, and of the answer that might have been expected from him.

"Well now, I won't compromise you; upon my word of honour as a gentleman, I won't. I understand perfectly your position. The barrack would soon become too hot for you, as it proved for my friend. But don't fear. All I now ask of you is, that you will pledge yourself, as a soldier and as a man who values his word, that if I divine rightly, the objects of the Sergeant's present visit, you will honestly inform us."

"And if he tries to make me promise that I won't tell you?"

"Then you needn't fear what he says and does afterwards. Precisely because he ventures to ask you for such a promise! It is *he* who will be in danger from you. Understand? You surprise me, Morgan! Why, I would give one of the apples of my eyes to get such a power over such a man if I were in your place, and felt as you feel. Eh?"

Slowly the new idea was penetrating into that stolid cautious brain, but it established itself at last, and

began to play strange antics when safely lodged there. The eyes rolled and brightened,—the body heaved up and down with an inward laugh,—and the voice presently expressed its share in the common excitement.

“D——, I see! I got him at last!”

“No, you haven’t, not yet, but you will have him if you mind what you’re about, and let me help you.”

“Aye, but I have, though! D’ye think I’ve had my eyes shut all this while? Not exactly. When I found my own sovereign, I saw, as any fool must have seen, that somebody must have gone to the expense of finding another for me; and that they didn’t want to say anything about it. I knew who it was that didn’t like Martin Todd; and I found out what Martin Todd had tried to make the Captain believe about—about—”

——“The gentleman in question: quite right to shun names. Go on. You interest me.”

“And I watched him as a cat watches a mouse—and he saw that I did, and might be he didn’t like it—but still he was quiet and civil. One day, he came, and he said to me (that was after the talk I told you of—when he advised me to spend the extra sovereign that had been found), he came to me, and he says, ‘Bill, I got more silver than I knows what to do with. Take a couple of pounds worth, will you? You’ve got a couple of sovereigns, I know. Hand ’em over in exchange. It’ll oblige me.’ But I’d expected something o’ the sort a long while, so I rapped out a strong un.”

"What a—a—fib?"

"Summat like one, and I said I'd parted with them both; sent 'em home. But he didn't seem to believe me. And now he's frightened again. Perhaps he guesses your errand."

"No doubt of that, for I sent to him the same paragraph that I sent to you. Go to him, then, and we will wait your return." But Morgan looked uncomfortable, as the time for action arrived; and began to hesitate, when to the surprise of all parties, there appeared at the door a new visitor, no less than Mr. Pay-Sergeant Dunk himself: a tall, well-built, powerful-looking man.

"Servant, gentlemen!" he said, as he entered, with a brazen assurance on his puffy, bloated face, that betokened he had by no means lost confidence, as yet, in himself.

"Your servant, Sergeant!" replied Mr. Payne Croft. "Very glad to see you. Sit down. What, our proceedings here got positively too interesting for you to resist joining any longer? Eh? Kind of fascination, perhaps. Didn't expect we should meet so soon; but I like the meeting all the better, for that very reason. Will you excuse us, gentlemen, for a few minutes?" This was addressed to Archy and Morgan, who got up, but were stopped by the Sergeant, exclaiming—

"No—no, I have no secrets to talk about. All's fair and above board with me."

"As you please. But I advise you—I strongly advise you—to change your decision. I shan't repeat my advice a third time."

The two men looked at one another steadily—searchingly; but there were few who could overpower or even cope with Payne Croft at that game. The Sergeant dropped his glance, in embarrassment, and said—

“O, it don’t matter. As you please.” So the others went out.

“Now Sergeant!”

“Now then!” and there was an attempt at the brutal laugh which Archy had so often heard; but it failed—in that unkindly atmosphere.

“We know all!”

“Much good may it do you.”

“Thank you—that’s a Christian sentiment; and now, therefore, can I help suggesting in return, that it’s a pity you should let the matter do you a great deal of harm. See, I have both the sovereigns here! Internal and external evidence all complete! Have examined all my witnesses! Made all my notes. Am just about to pack up, and adjourn the court to—to—shall I tell you where?”

The Sergeant’s face began to tell tales; all sorts of strangely dark and not very lovely hues appeared upon it. There was also a certain shaking of the under lip just before speaking, as if it had then lost the benefit of a fixed position over the tightly closed teeth. Again he essayed his old laugh of defiance; but the inner strength of a real confidence in the result was failing to give the usual zest and sonorous ring. The evil sound it did make re-acted upon its author. The barrister saw, and spared not.

“Come, Sergeant, it’s your last chance. Make a

clean breast of it, and have done. It's like physic: must be taken when the time comes: and slow drinking and wry faces don't improve the taste. Will you hear my terms now, or at the Captain's house?"

The Sergeant looked things unutterable, but said nothing.

"Here they are, and very moderate ones I'm sure. That you acknowledge in writing Martin Todd's innocence of the theft:—"

"How the — should I know that?"

"Very true. Here, Morgan!" and the barrister threw up the sash, and called out of the window to the private, who was walking in the back-yard with Archy. Morgan came, and Mr. Payne Croft said—

"The Sergeant wishes to know once more, and from your own lips, that you did find the sovereign you supposed you had lost, and for which this gentleman was so deeply compromised."

"Yes, I told the Sergeant so, long ago."

"Thank you, that will do." And he closed the window and shut out the possibility of further speech.

"You see, Sergeant, the first grand fact—the one upon which everything has turned is proved irresistibly, even by an unwilling witness. It is for you therefore to say, how far we are to go on—merely to compromise you more and more deeply at every step."

"What do you want?" hastily inquired the Sergeant.

"Your signature to this." And he held out a paper—which lay before him already prepared. The

Sergeant took it with those large dry hands, which crackled as he stood there rubbing the palms with the half-closed finger-tips; and at first he held it aloof as in a kind of simulated scorn; but he drew it closer and closer to his eye; and he read the words—

“I, Matthew Dunk, Pay-Sergeant of Her Majesty’s ——— regiment of ———, and located at Chatham, do hereby acknowledge that I heard some time ago from Bill Morgan, that he had found the sovereign which it was supposed Martin Todd had stolen. And I beg Todd’s pardon for not sooner making the fact known to him.

“(Signed) ———.

“Chatham, Sept. 15, 185 .”

“Will you sign that?”

“I’ll see you, him, and all creation blasted first!”

“Very good. Landlord!” The Landlord answered instantly to the barrister’s call, and he proceeded:—
 “Go to Captain White’s quarters, give my compliments—Mr. Payne Croft’s compliments—there is my card,—and say that both Mr. Sergeant Dunk and myself will take it as a particular favour, if he will be so good as to step down here for a minute on a matter of importance connected with Her Majesty’s service.”

“Send your own messages, if you like — don’t meddle with mine,” roared the Sergeant.

“Mine then be it;—but, I assure you, the circumstance will operate afterwards to your disadvantage.”

“O d—— you! Let’s have done with this humbug. Landlord, make me a stiff glass of rum-

and-water. Hot with sugar—and strong as h——! D’ye hear! Be quick.” The Landlord ran off, glad to delay Mr. Croft’s dangerous looking commission.

Mr. Payne Croft forgot now the ebb of time, and watched, and waited silently and without the least impatience. Sergeant Dunk walked about, hummed a stave or two—met the Landlord as he re-entered, drank off the whole tumbler full of liquor at one draught, and ordered another to be got ready by the time he should call for it. Again, the two men were alone.

“Come,—Mr. Barrister—don’t be too hard upon a fellow in a bit of a fix.”

“I won’t. Sign that. My employers expect very different terms; but I am a man of the world, and know we must compromise to succeed.”

“Compromise! Why, isn’t this downright ruin?”

“No, I think not. I don’t mean that it shall be ever used against you, except on one or other of these three contingencies: First, that my client is in serious danger from the revival of the story—which isn’t at all likely except through you, for his name is not Martin Todd;—”

“Hm! I guessed that!” muttered the Sergeant.

“Secondly, that Morgan is troubled for his share in the business, which has been altogether a very unwilling one;—”

“O, *he* may go to the devil in his own time for me!”

“Thirdly, and lastly, that any charge be ever brought against you, by a superior officer, for any kind of fraud or peculation in your post—if you retain it—

which I don't advise you to do. You are not so strong, Sergeant, you perceive, as you look; and therefore mustn't take it unkindly if, both for my own character and satisfaction, and for your moral well-being in the future, I tie you up a bit. These are my conditions, if accepted now. They'll be worse in an hour's time: and to-morrow,—why, Chatham won't hold you. Now choose. Don't hurry. Have in that other glass of rum-and-water, and calmly think things over. You won't wait? Want a pen? There 'tis then. Rather a straggling signature. Always write thus? Stay!" Mr. Payne Croft again lifted the sash, and called to Archy and Morgan to come in. They obeyed him. He then summoned the Landlord, who also came,—the three looking wonderingly at each other.

"Now, gentlemen, I am happy to say proceedings are drawing to a close. It doesn't matter to you, Morgan, nor to you, Landlord, what is written in that paper—but be pleased all to witness Sergeant Dunk re-trace his signature upon it."

Sergeant Dunk again looked—almost with admiration, dashed with a good deal of something else, though,—upon the face of the Barrister, who thus destroyed his last faint flickering ghost of a hope that he might deny that artificial signature. He now struck it out, and re-wrote it properly, with what he called "a better pen." And then all the others wrote their names, as witnesses, on the margin.

"Landlord! there's a sovereign to be expended just as you please for the benefit of the house!" And the Landlord went away rejoicingly.

"Morgan,"—and the Barrister drew the private aside and put a roll of gold into his hands, so as to be quite unobserved the while; it was tightly closed up in paper, that the coins might not sound. He then said to him,—“If you find Sergeant Dunk take any advantage of you, let me know. But if you play any tricks upon him,—I go over to his camp. You guess how that would end—eh?”

Morgan grinned, touched his head with a military salute, and walked off, thinking, to himself, with a kind of stolid wonder, “Fifteen pounds!—Not a bad day’s work!”

“Now, Sergeant, shake hands. Forget and forgive! This may be the making of a clever fellow like you—if you mind what you’re about. I’m not at all offended,—I’d rather any time deal with a rogue than with a fool. Wouldn’t you?” The brutal laugh did get out then at last with all its original gusto, as the Sergeant shook the proffered hand, and, drawing himself up to his full height, turned again to face the world, and marched away.

“And now, Mr. Cairn, for a good dinner, a bottle of wine, a chat and laugh together, a brief doze, a cup of tea, and then a long night’s work; dry, hard, legal work to finish off with!—My programme for the rest of the day.” But he did not wait till after dinner for the promised laugh. It began to break out in little half-smothered coughs, until Archy, while vainly trying to express his sense of a life-long gratitude, caught the infection of the lawyer’s face, and suddenly roared again. Mr. Payne Croft didn’t change his own dry, measured mirth, but looked approvingly on

Archy's. Presently, as he saw the latter wiping away the tears from his eyes, he said,—

“What amuses me is the fact,—one which I don't mind telling you now,—that beyond sending that preliminary shell into the camp, before I came hither,—I mean the newspaper paragraph,—I hadn't—on my honour, I hadn't,—a single useful thought in my brain this morning, when I began, as to how I might, could, would, or should get any hold of these fellows, or as to what the solution would prove to be.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

ARCHY BEGINS TO PAY HIS DEBTS.

ARCHY found at dinner that Mr. Payne Croft had not yet done with finessing and trick ; though his objects were now so different, and he so cautiously approached them, that Archy would have been quite unsuspecting of his operations but for the word or two that had passed on the lawn at Bletchworth, about the Barrister and Grace. As it was, the young student enjoyed amazingly the opportunity of watching manœuvres that were only to him sufficiently veiled to become attractive, and peculiarly *piquante*. He did not, therefore, allow a word or a sign to escape him that might show he was aware of the manner in which he was being played upon, but answered all sorts of questions—of which some only related to Miss Addersley—although they contained nothing of moment to either ; and he kept up with spirit a long conversation without once appearing to notice the odd fact that it continually turned aside to glance at the same young lady ; and he even managed—just as accidentally—to let Mr. Payne Croft see how enthusiastic was his own admiration of the personal and mental gifts of Mr. Dell's charming cousin, without giving the listener—that, ordinarily, most acute of perso-

nages—the least notion that he was, for once, being played with and speculated upon, and mentally overlooked, very much in his own fashion of dealing with other men.

Archy thought once, though, that Mr. Payne Croft looked at him in a curiously interrogative manner, which he could not understand; and he began to draw in and to whisper to himself, he must be more cautious. But although the look returned again and again, and at last grew alike irritating and laughable in its determinedly quizzical and fixed expression, it did not at all confirm Archy's first belief, that the Barrister was conscious of self-exposure. On the contrary, he seemed bent on another kind of exposure—that of Archy. Suddenly the latter understood what it all meant, and could with difficulty repress a smile. Mr. Payne Croft wanted to know whether he, Archy, had any special personal feelings at the bottom of all his avowed admiration for Miss Addersley; and that was his way of getting at the fact.

Archy, to set him at rest, observed—"I perceive what you are thinking of; but you are mistaken." He felt the colour mounting to his face and brow as he went on, "No, it might have been as you suppose—but that before I saw Miss Addersley—"

"You had seen some one else, I understand." And Mr. Payne Croft busied himself for the next few minutes in cracking and picking walnuts which he forgot to eat; and in curiously scanning the colour and transparency of the wine in his glass, which he held up to the light, but did not drink. And from that time he became more and more absorbed. And

Archy, remembering the programme of Mr. Payne Croft's day that he had heard sketched out, guessed that as Mr. Payne Croft had got all out of him that he could possibly desire, he would now be glad to get rid of him and proceed with the next item in the day's business. So with a few earnest grateful words he took his leave.

All the way home Archy revolved with a serious steadiness of purpose the offer that Mr. Dell had made to him. It was eminently attractive. He had no doubt he could make himself in a year or two a capital farmer. He was already an excellent botanist and geologist, and he had some smattering in chemistry. He was also familiar with all the new scientific theories that were just then revolutionising the agricultural world, without feeling the least fanaticism in their favour. He knew well what tender handling the old ways require, before breaking them to pieces to introduce new ones. He knew how constantly local knowledge, actual experience, and certain personal qualities, such as skill, tact, and industry, enabled men to make fortunes without being able to read one printed line in a book, and how theoretical science, in the absence of these accompaniments, had sent many a gentleman farmer rapidly into the Gazette. On the whole, measuring himself as severely as he could, and trying to think at every step as though Mr. Dell's interest alone were concerned, he came to the conclusion that he might accept the proposal, if he could but be sure of himself in another direction—one indicated by the words—Mrs. Dell. He had told her he was cured. He still believed he was. He hoped

with all his soul that he was. But he must look at things as they had been—at himself as he had been—and not pretend to deal with an unknown future. Love, or at least a certain susceptibility that might pass under that name, had led him into all his dangers: was it clear that it would lead him into no more? He could not answer that; not, at least, quite satisfactorily to his conscience; and he felt therefore no security for the due performance of his regular duties, or, at least, for any vigorous practical efficiency in a business which required such weighty responsibilities.

Yet, could he resign such a chance? Ought he to throw away the one only opportunity life might afford to enable him to do and to become all that he was fitted for? He wished once he were married—not as a man wishes for the realisation of his most cherished desires, but as a thing that would be very useful if it were but once over and done with. Yes, if he had but a good wife! A woman who might possess what he lacked; a steady, even temperament, a firm, immoveable self-control. But where was he to find such a wife? A woman who should be at once beautiful (he must demand that condition), in love with him, and capable of inspiring him with love for her? Pooh! It was another dream! He had done with dreams now.

And did Jean,—poor devoted Jean,—never cross his mind, during all these speculations? Yes, he thought of her frequently, but not with sufficient pleasure, in connection with these wanderings of his mind, to induce him to dwell upon the recollection. But as he drew nearer and nearer to his home, a

sense of his neglect of Jean began to press unpleasantly upon him. He remembered first one thing, then another, unnoticed at the time of their occurrence, which told him how wrapped he had been in the magic visions that perpetually hovered about Mrs. Dell, and how poor Jean had kept aloof from and avoided him in his daily visits to Bletchworth. But he really did love Jean, in a sort of brotherly domestic way; and the certainty of that love seemed in a measure to re-assure him, and to suggest that he could not have been so ungrateful to her, as he more than once suspected he had been.

In this state of mind he reached home: he forgot there, for the instant, everything else in the one absorbing joy of meeting with his mother; of seeing her happy and thankful face glow with emotion, as she saw the expression of his features, and received him in her arms; and of feeling her tremble, as he said,—

“Read, mother, read! All is settled,” and Mrs. Cairn took the paper, with those strange looking signatures upon it; and she tried to make out their meaning, but could not. Or rather she knew it so well, that she wanted to be away by herself alone, and pour forth in silent prayer the inexpressible gratefulness of her soul, that this, the blackest gloom that had ever crossed her path was removed; that her son was hers again, pure in heart, unsullied in character.

“I can't read very well now, without my glasses,” she said. “What is it, Archy? Don't mind me now, I shall be better soon; tell me. No fear of this

blow, boy! O may God ever bless thee!" And Archy—the paper still unread—fell on his knees before her, and his head dropped on her lap, and she took it between her hands, and leaned over it, and was happy, very, very happy, and very, very silent, for a long time.

"But, mother, you must hear the paper," Archy said at last, in a low tone.

"Very well!—my heart, boy, heard it all long ago." And then Archy read the document to her; and he explained to her how it had been obtained, avoiding at first, instinctively, the less serious parts of the narrative. But by degrees he told her everything he could recollect, and he was delighted to perceive that she was able to receive and to enjoy in her placid way all the details of Mr. Payne Croft's tentative sagacity and success.

And when that intelligence was discussed and dismissed, there was Mr. Dell's offer of Norman-Mount Farm to be also made known, and some decision to be come to about it. Mrs. Cairn listened gravely, yet with a certain vivid interest, as though it raised at once a host of fears and hopes into conflict; but for the present she said little, beyond suggesting that Archy should stay away from the Hall for some days, while they considered what was best to be done. Archy was rather puzzled at the request, which, for certain reasons of his own, he did not like to inquire into too curiously; so he consented; and then despatched a boy with a few hurried lines to Mr. Dell, enclosing a paper which spoke in its own naked simplicity of the entire success of his journey.

But that very evening, at tea, Mrs. Cairn began to try to pick out the ends from a certain tangled mental web, and to draw Archy—by no means willingly—to the task of helping her.

“ Archy, dear ! ”

“ Yes, mother. ”

“ Do you consider the old engagement with Jean quite put an end to ? ”

“ Engagement, mother ? Surely that is a strong word. ”

“ I understood it so. ” Archy was silent, and seemed inclined to go on with his tea in preference to the conversation.

“ Perhaps you think lightly of that ? ”

“ No, mother, indeed I don't, but— ”

“ But what ? ” Again Archy was smitten with a desire to eat, or to appear to eat, and be silent. So he answered nothing, and Mrs. Cairn continued,

“ Well, the time has come at all events for plain speaking. ” Archy looked as though he regretted the circumstance deeply, but couldn't help it ; so asked for another cup of tea. But he was now to be startled out of all these little affectations of an indifference he did not feel ; his mother effectually roused him by her next words,

“ Do you know that it was Jean's money that alone enabled me to seek you at Chatham ? Jean's money that I held ready for your discharge ; and that it included her last shilling ? ”

“ Her last shilling ? ” echoed Archy, who began dimly to understand alike what had passed, and what was coming.

"Yes; for all her other savings had been previously expended on me."

"You, mother? Is it possible!"

"It is true, and I must have starved or sought parish aid, but for Jean's assistance!" Archy got up, and walked about the room in deep agitation; but his mother's voice followed his steps—

"I need not tell you how my own funds drained away from me."

"No—no! I understand now, O mother I had no thought that matters were so bad. But I might have had! I might have had."

"But do you not ask me," she continued, "why it was that I should have allowed myself thus to pass under obligation so serious?"

"No—mother—I see it all now! Fool that I have been! I see it all now!" For a long while after that burst he sat moodily silent—answering only by monosyllables to any casual remarks made by Mrs. Cairn. She was glad to see him so impressed, though more uncertain about what the issue ought to be than she would have liked to acknowledge. She was the first to speak.

"Archy, don't be miserable about it. It will be no boon to the poor girl to give her a husband who does not care for her."

"But I do care for her! I am very fond of Jean—I mean I think very highly of her; and have now more than ever reason to be grateful to her."

"Yes; but you do not love her as women wish to be loved."

“No, mother, I fear not,” said Archy, in a melancholy tone, that touched the mother’s sympathies.

“Well, then, we must find some way first to repay all we have had from her; and then hope for some further opportunity to testify in a better mode our mutual sense of the invaluable services she has rendered to us.”

“And you say you could not have come to Chatham but for Jean?”

“Certainly not—at least not then. It was all her doing. She urged me, when I was unwilling, in my first anger against you; although perhaps I should have sought you later.”

“Ah, yes. Mother you would have come, but you would have been too late. Don’t blame yourself for that—blame me! I was in a state that I dare not again recall. Poor Jean! When did you see her last? When will she be here again?”

“I asked her to come over this evening, so perhaps she may be here soon. But she is sensitive, boy, and proud in her way—ay, quite as proud as I have ever been. If you lose her you will lose one of the best of wives.”

Archy answered nothing to that remark, but somehow could not help wondering whether on the whole he should be wise to give up the idea of Jean. He thought, perhaps, he could make as good use as most men of “one of the best of wives.” He began to wish to take a good look at Jean—have a good long talk with Jean—with the view of studying for himself, anew, whether his mother were right or wrong in her judgment. And he grew impatient, as hour after hour

passed and no Jean appeared. Once or twice he had serious thoughts of suggesting that a message might be sent to Bletchworth; but he fancied his mother might look at him and laugh, or say something that would have annoyed him excessively, if he did; so he waited, and wondered, and looked out of window, and took peculiar interest in the garden and the surrounding prospect, and at last became almost savage in his temper as he saw that Jean did not—would not—come! After a last fruitless visit to the garden, he relieved his feelings by exclaiming—

“I think, mother, Jean might have obliged you, when you asked her.”

“I think so too;” added the mother, “and especially now that she must know through your letter to Mr. Dell, that you have come home.”

“O,” thought Archy to himself, “that’s the very reason she doesn’t come, I suppose. Much obliged to her!” He began to light a candle—evidently preparing for bed, for it was between nine and ten, when he stopped, and exclaimed with sudden animation, “Why, there she is!” ran out, and returned with Jean; his face radiant with unaffected pleasure, hers trembling with fitful and secret emotion, which on the present occasion she did not need to disguise.

“O Archy, I’m so glad!”

Now Archy—what on earth possessed him to do such a thing then?—kissed her thin but glowing face, and tried to look at her after the process; but she was too wise or too secretly and sadly self-possessed, to allow it, and she got into immediate conversation with Mrs. Cairn, and presently was

listening to all the details of Mr. Payne Croft's strategy at Chatham.

Both mother and son were secretly pleased as they discovered that Jean was able to stay with them for the night, though they also saw that the fact would not have oozed out but for their own efforts and management. They sat late; and, with two at least of the party, the time was spent enjoyingly. Archy studied as well as he could by the individual specimen before him, the physiology and psychology of that somewhat attractive creature, "one of the best of wives;" and he determined he would review carefully in his mind,—before he went to sleep, in the solitude and silence of his chamber,—the materials he had collected, and try to discover to what legitimate use they ought to be put.

Whether or no he was illogically and wilfully anticipating some possible conclusion when he prepared again, at parting, to salute Jean—who shall say? But Jean was on her guard, and warded off the threatened assault,—he thought somewhat icily. The circumstance annoyed Archy; though for the life of him he could not discover whether it gave an improved or deteriorated aspect to his notions of "one of the best of wives." However, he went to bed, and thought himself to sleep.

There was a summer-house in Mrs. Cairn's garden, a little one, constructed by Archy's own hand in years gone by. When he rose in the morning, with his thoughts beginning again just where they left off as he fell asleep, and still pointing to no satisfactory conclusion (for Mrs. Dell's image kept stealing in

among them, and, while she stayed, investing as with a golden atmosphere his whole being; and leaving behind, at her departure, a certain sense of dullness and desolateness in all his possible views of life), he fancied the fresh air might invigorate him and enable him to decide rightly, one way or the other, upon what must prove the turning-point of his future domestic career; perhaps even of more than that, by its natural and inevitable consequences. So he strolled into the garden, and thence into the summer-house, where he found Jean; who, always an early riser, had that morning been earlier than usual. She was fully dressed; had even her bonnet on, and was writing a note. As she saw Archy, she passed the blotting paper over her half-written note, but then, by a change of impulse, took the note out and tore it up, saying,—

“I was just going. I promised to be back early at Bletchworth this morning if I did stay the night. I was writing a line to your mother.”

Although there was not the remotest touch of coquetry in Jean (poor girl! she would have shrunk with disgust from herself at the thought of the bare possibility!)—her conduct had, in every respect, all the effect upon Archy that the most refined craft of womanhood could have accomplished; nay, it did more than any coquetry could have achieved, because he would in the one case have felt at least a touch of suspicion as to its truthfulness, while in the other suspicion was simply ridiculous—impossible. This intended departure of Jean—so hurriedly and secretly—decided him.

"Jean," said he, taking her hand, "how will it be possible for my mother and me to repay you all we owe?"

"O, pray say nothing about it. Don't, please, don't." Jean spoke in evident distress.

"Nay, but I must speak, Jean. Mother has told me all. There is but one return I can make you,—a very inadequate one, I know, but my mother has set her heart upon it, and I have thought over the matter very carefully—as I am sure you would wish me to do, before—"

"Pray let me go! You pain me more than I can express!"

"Ah, Jean, you must hear me out. But why need I say more than this; I offer you my hand—I ask you to be my wife!"

"Never! never!" Jean exclaimed; then bursting into a passion of tears she ran out of the summer-house, through the garden-gate, and disappeared behind the cottages, before he could recall his bewildered senses.

Jean refuse him! Why, he had thought only as to whether he would accept her! He was now, for a moment, really angry—felt deeply humiliated. What did it all mean? Had his mother been deceived all the while as to Jean's feelings? Or did his own conscience begin to whisper, "had he played unwarrantably with the poor girl's feelings, and forgotten what was due to her self-respect?"

At breakfast he told his mother all that had passed. She was at once pleased and sorry. She could not even yet resign the hope of a marriage that she fancied

was so peculiarly calculated to ensure her son's welfare, and was therefore pleased to learn that Archy had seriously made Jean the offer; but she was sorry that he had done it so badly—though so naturally, in the existing state of his feelings; and she was sorry to hear how deeply Jean had taken his conduct to heart.

“Well now, Archy, I have only this more to say to you, and I shall not again, if I can help it, return to the subject. You must not play with Jean or with yourself. If you really want to know my opinion as to whether, in spite of this behaviour, she does love you, I will give it. I feel sure that she will never marry anybody else, even if she persist in refusing you. Why, where are you going? Breakfast's ready.”

“I shall follow Jean, and try to bring her back. If she refuse me I shall refuse the farm. I see now, as in a map, how the roads of life meet and intertwine. I have been a conceited ass; that's very plain, mother. But if it be not too late I will please you, Jean, and myself yet.” He was gone before Mrs. Cairn could make any comment.

Jean had reached the gate leading from the common into the lane which formed the approach to the Hall, when she heard behind her the sound of a horse galloping furiously. She turned, and stared in amazement at Archy, who was the rider, and who pulled up the horse by her side, and leapt off, exclaiming—

“So, I have caught you! But I had to unhorse the butcher's boy to do it. I wonder what he'll say when he gets time to reflect?”

Before Jean could determine what to do in this unexpected state of things, Archy had fastened the horse to the gate, put his arm in hers, and drawn her gently, but irresistibly along, back towards the common, and by the same route she had but just passed over.

"Jean, I am very foolish, very thoughtless in many matters, I know; but don't be harsh to me, don't be unjust! I am not so bad a fellow, after all, as you think me. I am now going to tell you a secret; one that must never pass your lips. Will you promise me? It is I, Archy, who ask you, for old affection's sake."

Jean murmured, half-unintelligibly, "Yes, I promise."

"Don't be shocked. I have been in love with Mrs. Dell! She discovered it, and told me so, instead of waiting till I told her. But, believe me, she would have waited a long while before I should have done that. Still, but for her sense and courage, there is no telling how far things might have gone with me. She saved me. She cured me. Perhaps I love her still; but if I do, it is in a way that I don't think any one, not even her husband, not even my wife (should I ever find one who will have me), needs to quarrel with."

"O, she is a sweet, and good, and true woman, Archy, and I don't wonder at you or any man loving her, unless—"

"Ah yes, I understand your exception; happily it doesn't quite apply to me. I did not know she was married when I first saw her, one morning, from Norman's Mount. I thought she was Miss Addersley."

Jean smiled at that. It was the first smile that had yet crossed the pale, thin, and now more than ever anxiously pre-occupied face. And she remarked, in explanation of the smile—

“Miss Addersley is a very different woman to Mrs. Dell. She is kind, often personally considerate, very clever, accomplished, and brilliant; but I don't know how it is, my heart cannot warm to her, though she has been more than ordinarily attentive and liberal to me.” This remark, unexpected as it was, revived, and made Archy conscious of, certain dim instincts and presentiments that he had not cared to inquire into; and it had the further effect of increasing his respect for Jean's intellect.

“Well, but Jean, please to come back,—no, I don't mean to the cottage, even though I am taking you there to breakfast,—I mean back to our conversation; I should rather say to my confession. If I had not, with Mrs. Dell's help, speedily righted myself, you may judge how I should have been punished when her husband offered to give me the management of Norman Mount Farm for a year or two for him, and then, if I succeeded, to receive me as his tenant afterwards; letting me pay back the capital and interest as I found myself able.”

“Did Mr. Dell offer that?” inquired Jean, with sparkling eyes.

“He did.”

“O, take it; I'm sure you will succeed.”

“So am I, if you will join me; and I am equally sure I shall fail if you refuse. Stay, and be silent, and don't run away till you have heard all. I

am resolved that I will not risk Mr. Dell’s property or accept his kindness, without giving him some sort of hostage for my good behaviour. Jean, I’m sure he’d take you !”

Jean hardly knew whether to laugh or to cry, so tried both together.

“Now, Jean, you know all. You know my faults—my weaknesses—and you see what a poor sort of fellow you will have to deal with, and to take care of, and to guide. But, on my soul, I do believe you will find me a good husband, if you are only patient with me ; and I am very sure I shall love you dearly, if you will only say—once for all—Archy, you may !”

Poor—poor Jean ! what could she do ? The treacherous, wily assailant was attacking her in her weakest point. She had been prepared for all but this. She trembled—and looked back—and Archy seeing that she did so, made her sit down on a little knoll, and he sat by her side ; and then, with gentle force, he got hold of her timid, nervous hand, and kissed it ; and the great heart of the woman could bear no more ; but she turned, sobbing, and threw herself upon his breast, and kissed him. There was no need for her to say in any other language, “ Archy, you may !”

CHAPTER XXIV.

A SURPRISE, AND AN INCONSISTENCY.

TH**ERE** are few things more charming than such a day as one occasionally sees in October,—genial and brilliant, with all the warmth and glow of summer, yet fresh and inspiriting as with the breath of a second spring; and what is autumn but a foretaste and promise of spring,—a season which says to us, in its own eloquent but wordless language, “though winter follows me, it is but to prepare for you the means of new enjoyments; to brace the thews and sinews that prolonged sunshine is apt to relax; to remind you that happiness itself is not an end but an accompaniment that God has graciously bestowed on mankind, while they fulfil the noble mission of development and duty He has assigned to them?”

It was on such a morning as this that Mr. Dell, soon after breakfast, sought the pretty little room next his own studio, which he had set apart for his wife’s use. He had furnished it completely to her taste, with busts, pictures, and flowers, one little round table and desk, one chair—a hint to visitors (himself included) that they had no business in that place—and a good lock and key, which she took care to use.

“‘Sacred to the Muses!’ ought to be written up out-

side," said Mr. Dell to his wife, as she admitted him in answer to his well-known tap. She smiled, but looked strangely weary as she did so; and even while she stood talking to him, seemed instinctively to feel for the arm of her chair to support her. Mr. Dell looked at her, and she answered his look with a fresh attempt to smile, but to his great surprise she burst into tears, and said—

"Don't mind me! It will go off soon. I have had a strange lassitude growing over me of late, and the more I struggle with it the more I seem to feel its power increase. Don't mind me! 'Twill soon go off."

"O, I'll tell you what it is, Winny; you are using your brain too much, and your limbs too little. Nature is intolerant of any disturbance of her just balance. See what a morning it is! Look out." He opened the window, and she came and looked out on the fair landscape, now rich with autumnal tints; she felt his arm circling about her, and her strength seemed to come with that loving, tender support.

"It is indeed an exquisite morning!"

"Yes; come now, give me *your* version of its appearance. I have been trying hard to say something to you on the subject that should make you smile at the bad poetry, if it failed to please you with the truthfulness of the description. But I can't describe it in words. I think I could in water-colours."

"Well, I was thinking a few minutes ago, it looked like a friend who has departed, and whom, in our great love, we have hurried after, and have brought

forcibly back to feast with us yet once again, before we can resign ourselves to say, 'Gone!—gone utterly!'"

"True—you mean the summer! Come then, let us go forth, and make this a day of high festival for his sake. If he has been brought back, I promise you he'll have little time to spare in regaining his due place on the high-way of the world!"

"Where shall we go?"

"O, anywhere for a scamper first; and then on our way back let us go round by the farm, and see how the newly-married folks are getting on at Norman's Mount. Do you know, Winny, I have come over to your opinion now about that match, and think it will be a good one for both parties. I feared at first there would be uncongenial tastes and dispositions, but I have grown wiser. She will worship him intellectually for knowing so much more than she does, and he's a man and will like that; while he will respect her, and be guided by her, in all the more critical questions of life, because he perceives and appreciates her steady strength of character, and his own tendency to dangerous aberrations when left alone! O, they'll do very well. He's skilful, intelligent, and scientific; she's careful, methodical, and the best house-manager I ever met with. Are you ready?"

"Yes," answered Winny, gaily, and entering into the spirit of her husband's desire for a day's open-air enjoyment.

"Very well; then go to the porch, you'll find George ready there with the horses; while I'll see if

Grace feels inclined to accompany us. I did suggest it to her at breakfast, but she said nothing." And Mr. Dell hurried off, whistling to his pups by way of warning to them of the meditated excursion. But he found that Grace had already dressed for the ride, and was waiting at the porch with Mrs. Dell when he got there. So they rode off, apparently a merry company.

Their way through the lane—always an amusing part of their ride, if they were at all in a humour to enjoy it—was more than usually provocative of mirth to-day. The overhanging boughs, as Mr. Dell observed, insisted on taking toll as they passed from the very lips of the ladies; and he seemed satisfied with that explanation of their proximity, till, in a moment of forgetfulness, his own hat was suddenly knocked off by an envious black-looking branch-stump; and when he had recovered his hat and his seat, the ladies, moved by some frolic, had put spurs to their horses, and dashed along, in and out through the trees, along the winding road, at a pace that he could not help thinking dangerous, even while he laughed enjoyingly at the spirit that had prompted it.

Away they went, through the great entrance gate, scattering the laburnum seeds like a shower about the roadway, and so on to the common, and out of Mr. Dell's sight, until he too had passed the gate, and beheld them far on, Mrs. Dell and the chesnut horse in front and evidently the ringleaders in the rebellion. The harder he rode to get up with them, the more they spurred and galloped to keep ahead; he got uneasy as he saw that, and moderated his pace, won-

dering how long they thus meant to keep him at so respectful but inconvenient a distance. But by degrees they allowed him to come up to them, both laughing heartily as he did so; Mrs. Dell, who seemed physically inspired for the morning, looking so arch and roguish, so ripe for any and every kind of mischief, that Mr. Dell began seriously to intreat them to be more moderate, which conduct of his only made their mirth more loud and inextinguishable.

But to his great relief they came to a hill, and they were all compelled to ascend it slowly. And though, as they reached the top, and saw a magnificent but dangerously steep road stretching far away before them, suggesting, "Now then, down, as hard as you can go, nothing to stop you for half-a-dozen miles!"—Mr. Dell was meditating laying violent hands on the bridle of his wife's horse, she saw a different sight, and her thoughts wandered away in a very different direction to that of sweeping along the tempting declivity at the fullest speed of her horse. She saw all the hill slopes covered with oak, now wrapped in its truly regal robe, put on, as it were, by loving and loyal hands as a last token and acknowledgment of royalty, before king and subject alike prepare to deal with the nakedness and privations of a wintry and adverse time that they know is at hand. Winny paused, let the reins drop unconsciously on her horse's neck, and as he stooped his head to examine and enjoy the qualities of the fragrant flower-gemmed bank by his side, they fell over his neck unnoticed by the fair rider, or by either of her companions. Minutes passed away of silent adoration of the fresh wildness,

the tender loveliness, and the golden splendour that everywhere shut her in. "Ah!" thought she, "if one could really reproduce this so that the world should see and feel it as I feel it now, poetry were indeed divine! But no; even the very faculties that enjoy, and that seem ever yearning and struggling to penetrate beneath the exterior covering with which Nature veils herself, only delude themselves, and find they were still but on the surface of things when they fancied they were descending to the depths. O for a higher hand to take my hand! A touch upon my lips that might bid me speak! An opening of my eyes that might permit me truly to see!"

While Winny was thus engrossed in thought,—while Mr. Dell, in advance, was watching the display of dogs and red coats that appeared over the crest of a neighbouring hill, and opened out rapidly over the whole hill-side, and while Grace in the rear, her favourite place, was watching both, and patting playfully the arching neck of her chesnut steed, he proudly responding with a dangerous upward toss of his head,—a horn was suddenly and loudly blown just by Mrs. Dell's horse. The animal started, reared, and as Mr. Dell turned, hearing his wife scream, he saw her borne on madly towards him clinging to the mane, the reins now flying loosely in the air, now dropping about the horse's feet, and increasing the danger. In an instant he was off his own horse, and standing ready to check, if possible, the runaway in his furious career. But the animal saw him, swerved aside, and being again met, turned, and dashed along towards the crest of the hill, the way they had come.

Mr. Dell saw the reins flying. Will she not snatch at them? No, no, she is too much alarmed! She is engrossed by the one overpowering instinct and desire to retain simply her seat! Now, again and again—O, surely she might grasp at them! But no, she does not! And he gazed helplessly, hopelessly, expecting every instant to see horse and rider, through the sudden entanglement of the animal's feet, rolling upon the ground!

Grace also saw, and was conscious that Mr. Dell watched her in impotent agony, asking her, asking himself, asking God, would she, could she, save his wife!

People talk of the rapidity of thought experienced in drowning, and in other terrible emergencies, when all worldly interests, past, present, and future, are concentrated into one brief point. Grace knew now what such talk meant. Thoughts and emotions, as with lightning-flashes, now shot through the darkness of her mind:—"Knowing what I know, can I be so insane as to attempt to save her now? Now that perfect success and certain oblivion may in a few moments be secured? Why do I think of saving her? O God, how he appeals to me! If I succeed, and risk my own life, can I undo the past? Hesitate no longer! It may be a mad impulse, inconsistent to the last degree, but I obey it! Perhaps we are both to die at once! I am willing!" These and hosts of other and similar impressions, linked inextricably together, seeming to belong to the same moment of time, and to occupy simultaneously the same common space in her brain, yet with all the effect of due logical sequence, which

was not for a moment lost—all these passed through Grace's brain in the inconceivably short space of time which elapsed between her first consciousness of Winny's danger and her loud energetic cry to her,

"Hold firm, Winny! Hold firm, Winny! You are safe! He shall not pass. I am here. Your husband is close behind you." Then forcing her own horse into the mid-way, she tried to stop Winny's before it could get up to where she was, by her gestures and exclamations; but the animal again shied off to the side without stopping, and was plunging past, when Grace made her horse leap right to his very head, and as her own horse's feet touched the ground, she made a desperate clutch at his mouth, and caught something;—yes, it was the rein which she felt gliding through her hand, but which she held convulsively, as she and Winny were now both carried away, side by side, but both still retaining their seats. And never for an instant did Grace relax her hold of the two horses, until, as their excitement calmed down, they were overtaken by Mr. Dell, who with pale face and quivering lips, could only murmur, as he received his trembling wife in his arms, and kissed her,

"Safe!"

"Yes, yes! But, O, Grace! Grace!"

"I cannot thank her. God will. He alone understands what misery she has saved me from to-day."

Why does Grace turn away from the eyes that seek her so full of emotion?

"You are not ill? not hurt in any way?" said Mr. Dell, as he took Grace from her horse, with scarcely less of tenderness than he had exhibited to his wife.

"I hope not; a little shaken generally, and my arm pains me, that's all."

"Your arm! O, surely not broken?"

"O no; only a little sprained, I think."

"Grace, repine not over it; treat it as a scar received by a warrior in one of those battles that make a man famous at once and for ever." And he sat down by her on the edge of the little grassy bank or pathway. Winny, who had wandered a little apart, first to offer up a lonely prayer, without which her soul could not rest, next to find a little pool of water, now returned with her handkerchief wetted at the corner. She found Grace still seated there, looking very pale and haggard, and Mr. Dell examining with anxious solicitude the bared white, very white arm, and asking, as he felt about, if it was there, or there, till she winced, and said, "Yes, that is the place." Winny, coming up, would neither say nor do anything till she had tended the poor arm, by making her handkerchief into a bandage, wet at one end, which she first rolled round the injured wrist, and then wound the dry portion over the other, and fastened it with a pin. Then, as she looked into Grace's face and saw the still increasing paleness, and haggardness of expression, she murmured some unintelligible exclamation, and threw her arms about Grace's neck, and wept there, tears at once sweet and bitter—sweet, through the love and veneration she felt for Grace and for her heroic act; bitter, for the pain she had by her own folly inflicted, and for the danger she had led them all into.

Grace kissed her in reply, but with a certain cold-

ness; and her heart heaved and panted so violently under Winny's pressure, that after a while she was obliged, with an almost impatient hand, to thrust the young wife back, who however, like her husband, had but one explanation—"Grace was more shaken than she would like to acknowledge; they must get her home speedily."

Mr. Dell wished to persuade them to wait while he fetched some vehicle for their safer conveyance, but they would neither of them hear of any such cowardly proceedings. So Mr. Dell did the next best thing he could think of. After seeing them both carefully mounted, he pushed his horse a little in advance, and maintained a determined walk the whole way, while the two ladies followed; the hearts of both too full for converse, yet both filled so differently! And in this sober, melancholy fashion, they returned through the lane which had some hours before witnessed their wild gambolling.

"How like life itself!" thought Winny. "Such is youth's first going out, such is manhood's late returning. Some of us prudent and useless; some of us erring and spared; some conquering, and maimed; all sad and sorry; and all beginning to think how sweet were rest!"

CHAPTER XXV.

PAYNE CROFT IN A CAUSE OF HIS OWN.

THE "shadow" began to lie heavily now upon Grace, and to extinguish by slow and insensible but certain degrees every bit of light or smile upon her face, which she had so long and determinedly maintained there by sheer force of will. Whether it was that the effort had grown too painful, the aim too remote or uncertain, or that she had found some unexpected obstacle within her own nature which at once baffled her understanding and paralysed her strength, certain it is she moved about now utterly unlike her former self, careless of appearances,—self-wrapped, yet starting now and then as if drawn back to sudden and intense consciousness of the presence and possible oversight of others.

The more she reflected upon the impulse that had led her to make so determined an effort to save Mrs. Dell, and which had been so successful, the more she was surprised. She might have easily persuaded herself,—if she had been one of that class who encourage all profitable self-deceptions, and try so hard to believe them true that they sometimes succeed,—that she had only then put the finish to a masterly system of policy, one that left Mr. and Mrs. Dell in deeper belief than

ever of her truthfulness and devotion to them both, that promised therefore in various ways to promote her ultimate ends, and to throw into eternal oblivion any dangerous agencies that she might have evoked. But she never did knowingly deceive herself. She was too strong, proud, and self-reliant, too naturally independent, not to be always willing to look truth in the face: liking it because it was truth, or because she ought to like it, was quite another matter. She knew, quite well, that if she had then been herself,—her ordinary self,—she would have played a very different game, one indeed that might have brought matters for her to a brief and—probably in the long run—triumphant issue. Was there then some other “self” in her that she yet knew not?—a part of her nature that did not resign itself to a half-passionate half-wilful love for another woman’s husband, and to an ambition that must sweep to its desires, no matter how remorselessly?

At first she laughed inwardly at the thought of such a possibility; but that thought—like a living creature that would neither be driven away by scorn nor violence—returned, and challenged her again and again to talk to it, cope with it, and master it, if she could: and she began to perceive, with terror, that she was no longer what she had always previously felt herself to be—supreme mistress of her own destiny,—queen over that little but by no means insignificant domain, the body and soul of Grace Addersley.

And now she became conscious of a strange fact which also had a startling influence upon her imagination. She had fretted secretly at the slow lapse of time

during the last few months, and felt at intervals almost frenzied by the apparently unprogressive and uneventful character of the life at Bletchworth; uneventful, at least, as regarded her plans and wishes. But now, since the discovery of the unsubstantial nature of the expectations she had based on Archy's character and position, and since the memorable period of her visit to Grey Ghost Walk, where she first gave loose to her tumultuous passions, and allowed them to carry her—whither she dared not now to reflect upon—since that day there seemed to her to have begun, as though suspended impatiently till then, a sort of general and sudden movement through all existence; and that she, as a part of it, and half its dread author, was now to be the sport of powers she knew nothing of; powers whose operations or purport she could not even dimly divine. It would have been impossible for any worldly contingencies to have been more truly appalling to Grace Addersley than this kind of ignorance and fear. It was like an earthquake playing beneath her feet. She could not be sure, wherever she moved, that she was treading on one single inch of solid ground. She tried to strengthen herself by hate of the one, to quicken her perceptions by love of the other, of the two persons whose images were always with her; but the effort was fruitless, and the only visible result was the constant deepening of the surrounding shadow.

At this moment a new incident roused her, as well it might, into new activity and speculation. As she came into the breakfast-room one cold morning in November and found, to her relief, that Mrs. Dell, whose languor increased visibly, was breakfasting for

once in bed, Mr. Dell gave the fire a stir with the poker, and said to her, in his usual cheery manner, though not with the old glad ring of the voice,

"Come nearer the fire, Grace; I have news for you."

"For me!"

"Yes; prepare for a surprise!" Grace internally shivered, desiring no more surprises. But she replied as calmly as she could,

"What is it?"

"A letter from Payne Croft. Can you guess what it's about?"

"No."

"O yes, you can—you must. I said a letter, I should have said three letters; one to me, one to your mother. Ha! I see, Grace, you understand now to whom the third is addressed. There it is. Read it, I won't look at you, while I pour out the coffee."

Grace took the proffered letter, read it calmly through, and was giving it back to Mr. Dell, but that he laughed,

"Me! I don't want it. 'Tisn't mine! Come, that's a good joke!" Grace smiled, and put the letter down on the table, with an indifferent air, and began her breakfast.

"Well, what shall you do?"

"Refuse."

"Not, I hope, without reflection. Do you know anything of the gentleman's character or prospects?"

"Very little."

"Then let me try to enlighten you. He is already the second in actual position on the western circuit,

and universally acknowledged, by his brother barristers, as certain soon to be the first. But it is rather in the character of the man, than in his present fortunes, that I should look for the knowledge of his future destiny. To say nothing then of his intellectual skill and subtlety, or of his legal knowledge which he is ever feeding, night and day, he possesses a will that almost does what we are told to believe Faith can do, remove mountains. He is one of those men who never go back. He is intensely but silently ambitious. No amount of drudgery appals him; I rather think that the very excess of it has the same effect in stimulating his imagination and drawing him on, that the sight of a particularly fine day has upon a lover of external nature—he looks and longs, and at last finds it altogether irresistible.” Again Grace smiled, and there was visible in her face a growing attention, which induced Mr. Dell to go on, between the sips of his coffee, and during the buttering of his dry toast.

“Payne Croft’s career is as plainly to be seen beforehand as any man’s I ever heard of. He is never what I should call really eloquent, but he possesses sufficient fluency and vigour to give the notion of eloquence to all his set speeches; and that notion is precisely what our practical English mind likes best. O yes, he must succeed. Barrister, Queen’s Counsel, Attorney and Solicitor-General, Judge, possibly Lord High Chancellor.”

“You really think so?” exclaimed Grace, now at last blushing with excitement.

“I do indeed! Any how, he will—must rise. And his wife may certainly calculate on a public life

of no ordinary consequence and splendour." Seeing that Grace was now silent, and deeply meditative, Mr. Dell added, "If now you will take my advice, you will consider deeply before you answer his letter. He is not a man to repeat his offer."

"Offer! It is not an offer."

"Of course not, in absolute terms—not yet. But if you allow him to come here, as he wishes, and permit him, as he phrases it, 'to enjoy the pleasure of your society for a few days,' I know him and you too well not to be quite sure that he will desire to extend the pleasure for the whole of his mortal days."

"Thank you, cousin." Then Grace rose, saying, "I will do as you recommend me; but I think this letter should not remain unanswered, even for a single post."

"No, clearly not."

"There will then be but little time. Shall I find you in the studio by and by?"

"Yes." And Grace, taking up the letter, walked slowly away, while Mr. Dell called after, in a low but significant voice, "Don't forget the Lord Chancellor."

* * * * *

"So then," thought Grace, as she walked about in the solitude of her own room,—glad to know that not even Jean's shrewd, prying eyes were any longer near her—"So, at last, another places before me all that I had hoped *he* would have given me. More than all;—for I should have had to urge him on. This man needs no urging; and his success, doubtless, will be the greater.

"Is it possible! Yes—the steps look all feasible—

he is a rising barrister—will soon, it is expected, be the first in the circuit, then the silk gown—political office—judicial office—all—all within the reach of any true man who is fit for all, after he has once put his foot firmly upon the rung of the ladder!

“Ah, why did I not know him earlier! Yet, should I have cared for him as I have cared for—? I think not. It is the profit—the honour of success, I covet—not the nature that wins success! Fool! Inconsistent again! Why did I not discover that philosophy before it was too late!” Here Grace looked round as though the very sound of the words “too late!” in her own soul—for she had no otherwise pronounced them—might be startling other ears than her own. But she was in no danger. She soon relapsed into her secret and solitary self-communion. “Why did not this happen a few weeks ago—before—before!” Grace paused in her walk, and leaned against the wall, either to hide the light from her eyes, or to cool her burning head against the cold surface. Presently, she started away, and walked rapidly, fanning voluntarily her growing fury, and muttering to herself—

“Yes—too late!—too late!—for that now! I will succeed! I will not be foiled! I have paid the price:—the prize shall be my own. Mine! Mine!” The strong hands were nervously clenched, and rose in the air almost above her head, as she said this. Then suddenly the fingers were loosened and were rapidly passed over her brow, as if to throw aside her hair, or to hurry out of the way some real or fancied impediment that prevented clear, satisfying vision.

"Yes—yes—I see all now. Fool that I was to shrink back at my own shadow, to hesitate before the evidence of my own success! This makes him surer than ever mine, when—" Grace said no more, even to herself. It was a habit of hers to stop the instant anything like decision could be arrived at: she knew, without Hamlet's example or instruction, how apt is the instinct for action to get "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," if it once listens at the wrong time, or for an unnecessary moment.

She now sat down to all the routine of a most elaborate toilet; and, while she was thus engaged, smiled as her eye fell upon Mr. Payne Croft's letter. Then she looked rather slowly and anxiously at her face in the mirror; and became aware that it had undergone a change for the worse: but that was a fact to be dealt with—and humoured or conquered as the case might admit. So without useless repining, and without waste of time in impossible undertakings, she did her best, with some little aid from art that I don't profess to understand except by its results, to recover the semblance, at least, of her original and queenly beauty; and not till she had finished and satisfied herself with what she saw in the glass, did she write the answer to Mr. Payne Croft's letter. That answer occupied but little time; and there was not the least pause or hesitation in any way about the process, until it was written, upon a thick rose-tinted paper, and sealed with the most delicate of green wax, bearing the impress of a signet, the motto of which was—"Fidelity." But as she looked at the motto, she held the letter in her fingers doubtfully, looked up

once or twice, still in deliberation—then smiled—and prepared to let it go, merely remarking to herself aloud, as if in explanation—“He knows I have no other seal in ordinary use!”

Grace then took both the letters in her hand, and went radiant with recovered beauty, and as it almost seemed re-established health, to Mr. Dell in the studio. He was lying on the sofa, apparently buried in thought, not having even his usually inseparable companion, a book. Grace saw he looked very melancholy. But he jumped up at the sight of her, made her take his place, and smiled inquisitively as he took the letter to Mr. Payne Croft from her outstretched hand. He was then about to open it, but she touched his fingers to stay him, saying,—

“Before you read it, cousin, let me ask you one question very earnestly:—if the moral responsibility of this affair rested with you, and you only; if it were you who had to say to yourself what I have now to say to myself—‘Ought I to encourage the addresses of a man for whom I have no love, but who could give me what I acknowledge I have often desired—worldly success’—”

“Well, but Grace, give him the chance. Perhaps you may love him by and by.”

“Never!” Grace looked steadily at Mr. Dell’s face as she said this, and he looked at hers, struck by the peculiar, almost reproachful tone. Old associations that he had utterly forgotten, or remembered only in the most abstract sort of way, shot up, and kindled the colour in his face; and then he saw a far deeper suffusion in Grace’s face answering his; and he

dropped his eyes, and said to himself—"Poor Payne Croft! I understand now! There's an end then to your suit." Grace, with her cheek glowing to a rosier and lovelier hue every instant, again spoke, though with a certain downcast air and timid voice—

"You would not as an honest man advise me, who am, I hope, an honest woman, to answer this letter otherwise than as I have answered it?" And Mr. Dell opened the letter and read the elegantly expressed refusal; which, without suggesting to a stranger like Mr. Payne Croft the least notion of Grace's own history and motives, would certainly make him believe that it must be some pre-engagement on her part that dictated her refusal, since the tone of the letter was so very cordial and respectful towards him personally. Mr. Dell read in silence, folded the note, and replaced it in the envelope, then glanced at the motto, which seemed to be still less calculated to encourage him to speech; and at last he handed the letter back to Grace, with the observation—

"I suppose, then, it must be so—but for your sake I can't resist a kind of sorrow."

"Nor I a kind of gladness, cousin, that comes over me to know it is done and gone! There! it is in the post-bag, and irrevocable."

CHAPTER XXVI.

COOK DOESN'T WAIT FOR LEAP-YEAR.

THE Monday, the black Monday, which was to bring down Cook's vengeance on the unconscious but guilty head of John Short had arrived at last, after "no end o' worriting disappointments" and postponements through Mrs. Dell's "vagaries" in always "a-wanting" Cook when she was about "to git away." Yes, about tea-time in the afternoon the coach set her down, umbrella and all, at the "Goose and Gridiron," at the top of the High Street of Leatham. The red shot-silk dress glowed with all the colours of the sunset; her shawl burned with a broad scarlet border; her bonnet—shaming the bonnets of these degenerate days—was a something to look at and to think about, as well as to wear; altogether Cook felt she was in proper trim for the business in hand; and saw with satisfaction her personal importance reflected in the admiring looks of the tradespeople as she walked along.

But she had business in hand, and was not "a-goin'" to be drawn into "a-forgettin'" of it, either by the silent admiration of spectators, or by John Short's flummery, which no doubt he was "a-preparin'" to try on. She thought of all this firmly as she ap-

proached; and by the time she stood before the saddler's shop she felt quite up to the desired pitch of excitement and moral indignation. She grasped her umbrella, she set her lips, and, like Eugene Aram, felt herself equal to any fortune. But what was her surprise when on looking into Mr. Short's shop window, she perceived—instead of the scrupulously neat order that usually prevailed there—everything covered with dust, and tossed about in confusion. Even the horse in the centre, notwithstanding his raised foot and the graceful bend of his neck, had a worried, woe-begone look, and a kind of forced hilarity in the curl of his tail. What was the matter? “Had John Short run away, not a-darin' to meet her?” was Cook's first question to herself; and there was a sort of satisfaction in the consciousness of her power, mixed with a kind of amiable wish that it might have been exerted for a different end.

Determined to know the “worst on it,” Cook went in, and found things looking even more deplorable in the parlour than in the shop. John Short's dinner things stood on the table, not yet cleared away; and to make room for them, the dirty breakfast things on the tea-tray had been hastily pushed off the table on to the floor in a corner. The fire was out, though John Short—actually John himself—who had not noticed Cook's entrance, was busy on his knees before it, puffing at it with his short breath, and it revealed at intervals, as he did so, a bit of sparkling tinder, which he was bent on coaxing into yet another flame, that might light the green wood, that might kindle the slaty coal, that might boil the kettle that John had in

touching confidence put on at the top of all. Cook looked and smiled, and relaxed in her just anger. All her womanly sympathies were stirred at that melancholy sight, and at the generally wretched aspect of the place. A sense of the blessedness of her own opportune arrival began to warm her very heart.

"Hey-day, man!" she called out loudly,—and John turned with a half-ashamed, half-mirthful face, that had just taken a black streak from one of the bars of the grate,—“what in the name o’ patience’s the matter?”

“Servant gone away!” John grunted.

“Gone away! and can’t you get another gal?”

“Ain’t got one, not yet. Hardly had a bit o’ dinner, and it seems I’m not to have any tea.”

“John Short, stop that blowin’ nonsense! Don’t be a fool. There! get out of the way, do! Gie me the keys of your cupboard, and go you into your shop, this blessed minit, and tidy it up, do! I’m ashamed to see sich a sight.” John stared, and prepared to do as he was ordered, with a certain feeling that things had come to such a pass, that whatever happened now they couldn’t be much worse.

“Got tea, and sugar, and milk?”

“No milk—cat just drunk it.”

“Get ha’p’orth, then, directly. Got bread, and butter, and muffins?”

“No muffins.”

“Get some, then.”

“Can’t. Nobody to mind shop.”

“I’ll mind it, and should like to see anybody run

away with it, while I'm here! Now, John Short, *if* you please!"

John walked off so fast that he fancied he was running, and grew excited with the mere idea.

Cook now put down her umbrella, took off her bonnet, which she carefully suspended from a great hook she found upon the wall, tucked up her dress, rolled back her sleeves, pinned a gigantic handkerchief upon her ample bosom, and allowed it to fall gracefully below, and began work, while she muttered to herself,

"When a man lives without a wife and puts on a show of comfort, there ain't no countin' the harm he does in the world, with the conceited notions it puts into people's heads that they can do without wives as well as with 'em, and be just as easy. Lor bless me, look here! what a farce it is. O' course they gets used to it—they must, if they won't get wives—but how? why, just as you may get used to takin' a dose o' physic without makin' a face, and when you gets that fur it's easy to go a bit further and say it's nice. I can't abide such wicked notions." And then Cook's eye fell upon John's favourite yellow cat. "Oh, drat you—you drinks the milk, does you?" and Cook began operations with a good beating upon the offender. "Don't do that agin if I comes here!" Then with a benevolent scorn she looked at the grate, took off the kettle, broke to pieces all John's elaborate fire-raising edifice, and began really to make paper, and wood and coals "know what's what" as she said, and burn "in no time" at her bidding. Then she replaced the kettle, dusted the hearth, and swept the carpet. It was wonderful to see the colours she brought back to the light of day

on that carpet, and John looked with charmed eyes at his own property as he returned with his purchases.

“Now sit there, and make your mind easy, do ; and take them muffins. Do ’em nice and brown while I washes up the tea-things and get things fit for a Christian to use.” But even all these operations, and the making of tea, did not suffice : there must be a dusting of the broad-bottomed chairs, and a “polishing” of the “duck of a round table” till the unveiled mahogany blushed and grinned again in the firelight at its own unwonted comeliness.

“Come, Cook, that’ll do !” said John, who grew impatient for his tea, and only wanted the enjoyment of that meal now to fill up the measure of his gratitude to Cook for her timely arrival. But Cook had yet to draw forth another arrow from her quiver—or, to suggest a more suitable image, she had now to shake out a stream of benefactions from her overflowing cornucopia, which she took from her pocket in the shape of a great paper bag, full of cakes, and poured out upon a large plate, and pushed them over to John, who wasted no time in words, but began with equal vigour and impartiality on muffins and cakes to make up for the recent disappointments attendant upon a series of badly prepared and deeply irritating meals. Cook couldn’t herself eat much to-day for the pleasure of seeing him eat. Her heart overflowed with real pleasure at the spectacle.

“God bless the man !” she ejaculated. “Don’t stop ! Go on ! What a comfort it was I came, to be sure ! What a mercy !” John Short took her advice and went on ; though not altogether oblivious

of the fact that there might be a small bill of some kind running up; but who, after so many questions, would have paused just then? Certainly not John. Cup followed cup; muffin muffin; cake cake; and none of them were interrupted by any foolish attempt to talk. John smiled now and then, and often said "Yes," and "No," and "Indeed!" but only as so many zests to the appreciation of the fact that no more was expected from him: not yet, at least. But there was a reckoning time to be looked for, and it came.

"John Short," said Cook, in a very mild subdued voice, "you know I've always took an interest in your welfare!" John considered,—didn't see anything that committed him in assenting to that proposition, so nodded, as he put a counter-query, "Pot quite drained out?"

"Not if I knows it. Best cup of all for the last!" And she poured it out, and went on with her remarks:

"Well, it aint pleasant to see you a goin to rack and ruin in the way I found you."

"No; but you see, Cook, servants don't run away every day—"

"They might, for any good they does," was the tart reply. "Well, John, I don't want to have it on my conscience that I seed you and your comfortable business a fallin to the ground, and refused to lend a helpin hand." John pricked up his ears at that, wondering what she meant. Had she really saved money? Would she lend him some? He did want a few pounds badly to advance him in business. He was getting on, for he was an industrious and careful fellow; but he wouldn't speculate, nor go much into

debt ; and as he had had no original capital, except his two horny strong hands, he was often put to it to maintain himself as a master tradesman, when employers would run up long bills or change their custom if he grumbled.

Cook saw the impression, and left it for awhile to settle into his mind by its own internal gravity, while she touched upon another topic :

“ Do you know, John, you’re a wastin away to a shadder ? you are ! And you’re a gettin such a hang-dog look I scarce knowed you, as you knelt down there blowin away as innocently as them great puffy-cheeked cherrybums in picters, that blows and blows at nothing partickler.” John wasn’t aware that he was already exhibiting the effects of his recent troubles, but it was possible ; and at all events he needn’t deny it. Besides, just then he was more interested in looking round to see if it were a fact that he had really eaten the last cake, and the last muffin, as well as drunk the last possible cup of tea. The “ wasting ” of the good things just then troubled him more than his own. He felt he could still eat, though half aware he was getting uncomfortable with what he had eaten already. And then, like the ungrateful world at large, seeing there really was nothing more to be expected, he began to look narrowly, scrutinisingly, into the question of the expense. Cook, on her part, observing that he did not respond to her first invitation said, with a voice slightly sharpened in tone, and rising in pitch and energy,—

“ Well, the long and the short of it is, you wants a wife ! ”

John crossed his legs, and looked very serious. That was a shot between wind and water. He must get to work himself to resist, or go down—to matrimony; without even the benefit of a supposititious choice. But while he hesitated as to what he should say, he was well nigh lost.

"Mind," continued Cook, "when I say a wife, I means a woman as'll manage, and do for you, and make you comfortable; not a live doll to be stuck up for show in your parlour, as you sticks up that horse in your shop, which looks as though it was a-going to carry you all over the world, but only sticks out its tail, and stops. You don't want a poor thing like that gal o' mine—that Meg—as can't think of nothing but work, and knows little o' that; and 'ud pine away if you tried to make her comfortable."

"Think so?" said John, with more than usual interest in a question of his own.

"Think so, indeed! You try her! Just you try her!"

"Try her?" enquired John, with an odd twinkle in his eye.

"O, nonsense! You knows what I mean," replied Cook, testily. "You wants a solid, sensible, middle-aged woman, as can make everything nice about you—a woman as understands you, and all your ways! Aye, and if I were in your place, I'd look out for a woman who had a bit of money." John looked at her, and she looked at him, and nodded, and presently nodded again, as she observed,—“I would, John!”

"How much ought she to have, should you say,

Cook ? ” again questioned John, with a lively interest as to the answer, and thinking he was getting information that might be useful in a particularly ingenious, safe way.

“ Well, mayhap, fifty or sixty pounds ! But she should be a woman as had good things about her beside ; or, lor bless you, where ’d be the use of fifty or sixty pounds ? ”

“ Good things ? ”

“ Aye, dresses, and plenty on ’em—some silk ; and a trunk full of linen, and knick-knacks ; and expectations besides ! ”

“ Expectations ? ”

“ Well, yes, John, a relative has a-promised to remember me in his will ; and I knows that means a twenty or thirty pounds more, some day.”

“ Hem ! ” coughed John ; and the cough expressed, probably, in its very dubiousness, the true character of his thoughts. He stuck his great thumbs into the arm-holes of his waistcoat, tipped up his chair on to its hind legs, and began to rock to and fro, while he turned things over in his mind, with his usual deliberation. He acknowledged, for the first time in his life, that there really was more to be said for Cook’s view of the case than he had previously imagined. And that idea found expression before he ventured to engage with any other idea that might be inclined to follow and dispute with its predecessor.

“ Well, Cook,” said he, “ I’ll consider your kind offer—advice, I mean ; but I shouldn’t like to do anything offhand, because, you see, it’s like committing suicide ; once done, you can’t undo it.”

"Fiddle-sticks!" exclaimed Cook, giving herself an impatient shake. "But lor, John! you haven't had your pipe. Look!" and she produced from her inexhaustible pocket a short meerschaum, that won John's fancy instantly. "This was my poor David's; and I've kept it since he died, till I could find a man fit to smoke it after him. John, it's yours now. I think this 'bacca that our gardener buys is better than yours. Try it, and if you like it, I can get you plenty cheap." John thanked her, filled and lighted the meerschaum, and smoked away, saying to himself,—“Well, well, perhaps I needn't mind. She'll go soon.” Then he remembered he must say something, so he repeated,

“Well, Cook, I shall consider carefully all you've said, and —”

“Lor bless the man!” interrupted Cook, unable longer to restrain her contempt, and elevating her voice, so that John got fidgetty lest the neighbours, should overhear, “Lor bless the man! It takes a deal of considerin now—don't it—whether you shall go to rack and ruin as fast as your legs'll carry you, or live happy and comfortable? But even supposin you are doubtful o' betterin yourself as you purtend—though I, as knowed your poor dear mother afore you was born, ain't the one to put bad advice in your head—Godamighty knows that!—but supposin you are duberous, I just ask you this, John Short: you're a man, ain't you? Well, when I ha' got a fritter in my pan as I'm afeard'll break afore I turn it out, do you think I stands an hour a showin of it the dish, and wishin it were done? No, I takes it, and says I, 'Now if you breaks you breaks—but out with you!'

O, John Short, it's only a poor fool as 'll stand a shilly-shallyin with Providence, when it comes and shows him what oughter be!"

"Cook, I believe you are right; upon my soul I do!" exclaimed John, who found in the tone of that speech something he could cordially agree with, though he didn't exactly satisfy either Cook or himself what it was. However, he seemed to have made a lucky hit, for Cook's features relaxed and shone under the fire light with ineffable radiance, as she shook off the crumbs from the Brobdignagian handkerchief, and continued,—

"Yes, John, as I said before—fifty pounds in the bank."

"Fifty or sixty!" remarked John mildly but correctingly. Cook laughed.

"Well, well, mayhap there's even a trifle more than the sixty; and there's the twenty or thirty from that other quarter, as I expects, to say nothin of a sumptush mahogany wardrobe, with glass outside and trays inside, as I wur promised long ago by the same party. Lor, John, how nicely it 'ud stand at the end of the room there, and fill up that bare wall! wouldn't it? Though I'm afeared it's too big." Cook got up and began measuring with her handkerchief. "No, John, it'll just do,—I declare it's the exact size!"

"Oh!" murmured John, faintly.

"And o' course you'll take the money out of the Savins Bank, and put your business to rights, and get a journeyman besides that there 'prentice Tom."

"O yes, I should, if I were to marry a woman with

money," John rather venturously put in; but he might as well have talked just then to a ship in full sail, coming into harbour on a spring tide.

"Well, you know, John," she continued, "folks can't expect every thing their own way. I don't! O' course I'd a preferred a keepin my bit of money safe in the bank to riskin it, but I'm not a going to marry you and then be afraid on you."

John looked to see what might be the precise meaning of the words, but Cook was off again, and it was all John could do to follow her. Yet he had a sort of uneasy fear that if he didn't, he should soon find himself walking out of Leatham Church with Cook, before all his neighbours, and be receiving their congratulations, which John didn't at all want.

"And, John, dear, would you like a handsome red-flowered waistcoat to go to church in—I mean for—for the occasion," Cook simpered; "for I've got a beauty put away long ago? My poor David ordered it, but died before it come home!"

John looked vaguely about him: absurd fancies about the possibility of making an honourable retreat had been deluding him on, till it was too late! Could he not run away? And if he did, where was the good, if she remained there waiting his return? Ah! that foolish question of his, which looked so sly at the time,—“How much ought she to have, Cook?”—it was that which had done all the mischief. “Perhaps she won't go away at all!” thought John with increasing alarm, “but take a lodging next door, and keep her eye upon me till she takes me to the altar! Or perhaps she'll go secretly and put up the banns

this very night, and say nothing to me till the parson tells me all about it before the congregation at church next Sunday morning!" And poor John, reflecting on his hapless position, fairly forgot himself, and groaned.

"Not well?" inquired Cook, tenderly. "Where's the brandy?"

"None nearer than the Goose and Gridiron," replied John, again groaning; this time with a clearer feeling of coming relief. "Would you mind fetching a quartern?"

"O course, I wouldn't! There! sit by the fire, and keep warm till I come back. If you ain't better soon, I'll get your feet into warm water, and put you to bed." But here John groaned again so violently, that she snatched a bottle from the cupboard, and hurried off without further remark to him, though thinking to herself—"Lor! What can a made him so bad?"

John watched her departure in melancholy silence, till she was fairly outside the shop; then he jumped up, ran to the shop, cleared out the till of all the money there was in it, scribbled a line or two on a card to his 'prentice, who was out on business errands, tacked it on to the counter with small tacks, in a place where he and Cook must see it, snatched up an over-coat, and—O, man of little heroism!—fled!—actually fled through the back door, and jumped over a low wall to reach the open free country, where alone he felt safe, and where presently he was out of sight, making way towards a snug little public-house in the neighbouring village.

I shall not attempt to describe Cook's feelings on

her return to see no John, and to see that card, upon which, after long efforts, she spelled out—

“To Tom.

“Called away by business to town. Look sharp after things. Haven't the least notion when I shall be back.”

CHAPTER XXVII.

A SILVER LINING TO THE CLOUD.

EARLY snow lies upon the ground ; early, for it is yet only the beginning of December, and the first fall around Bletchworth generally takes place after Christmas. Mr. Dell stands at his dressing-table, and, as he looks out upon the landscape, so prematurely wintry, begins to speculate on some mystic tie between the life of nature and his own life ; for he, a young man, is beginning to grow gray with anxiety, and as his soul looks forward, more and more cheerless does it find the prospect. Yet he scarcely dares to look back, for the contrast between what was and what is, between what he anticipated and what he has found, is too terrible ; and enhances, a thousand fold, the intensity of present suffering.

His wife, since the shock she received by the running away of her horse, is growing daily more and more feeble. He feels that in spite of all he can do, by the tenderest care and watchfulness, and by the most absolute self abnegation to check the insidious malady—whatever it may be,—in spite of all his wrestling with, and yearnings to deny, the fact, he feels that his efforts are failing. Never, by any chance, does he let her see the shadow upon his face, or hear the least

touch of fear or repining on his tongue. He is called upon at last to show whatever of manliness there may be in him, and he nobly responds. There is nothing that he could not do or suffer to save that one dear life, so precious to him ; and he is conscious that if he can save it, it will be only by heroic self-denial and unfailing self-control upon his part.

But he is mistaken in thinking Winny does not detect by a thousand subtle affinities of thought and instinct, what is passing in his breast. And if she could have experienced a deeper, a higher, or a holier affection for him than before, she would have felt it now. She tries her very utmost to respond to his cheering brusque voice, his genial smile (which however he dares not let her eye rest on too long, unless she is really kindled by it), his merry laugh (which he shrinks from himself the moment he hears it, and wonders how it must affect her), his quips and jests and pretended fits of anger—she takes all this in seeming belief of its reality, and so the end is, in a measure, gained : both are combining to keep off to the last possible moment, trusting still to avert, the fatal hour when they must together acknowledge the impending doom. O, loving and faithful hearts ! ye would turn hypocrisy itself into an almost sublime virtue.

But Mr. Dell will no longer be content with all these instinctive efforts that his love and his general knowledge of life have suggested. Unwilling as he has been to overpower her reluctance to seek other advice, while there was the least probability of success by their own unaided efforts, he now determines there shall be no more delay ; something must and shall be

done, and the only question is how to gain her free consent and earnest co-operation; both of which he feels are indispensable to success. The great difficulty is that he must now indirectly own to her what a kindly deceiver he has been. He dreads, with almost mortal fear, meeting the ghosts of his own bold assurances to her the instant he allows the words to escape from him—"Winny, you must do this, or there may be danger."

But Mr. Dell is a man who never really postpones action when he believes it a duty to act; who would never, for instance, with all his self-indulgence, put off inevitable pain with a weak desire to inflict it on the to-morrow in order simply to spare to-day. He determines therefore to speak to Winny, now before dinner; and he goes slowly to her room, shaping out as he goes, the things he will say, and the limits within which he will speak. He finds her sitting on a chair at the window, and leaning on the curved end of the little sofa, looking on the snow-covered lawn, or at the equally snowy mountainous blocks in the sky, which are slowly and majestically sailing through the blue depths of the atmosphere. She has placed a little cushion at her back to relieve her weary, sensitive frame; but in no other respect does her husband perceive, for the moment, any evidence of her suffering and debility. She sits fixed, motionless, buried in reverie, and does not even hear him enter—a sound that is always the first to penetrate through her ears, and to awaken her heart, however they may be closed for the time to worldly impressions. He does not like—in truth he is afraid—to trust himself to listen to

anything she may happen, in her supposed solitude, to say. He still clings to hope so vividly, yet so feverishly, that he is alike alarmed and impatient with himself if there is the least suggestion of a word or a fact that might dispute the basis of his hope. He has a kind of fear she may say something to open to both, and while both are thus together (so that there can be no longer any kindly or wise illusion possible between them) the vista that he knows both are dreading to look into. But he is unwilling to disturb her. It is just possible she may, even in that attitude, have fallen asleep, and so be obtaining a relief from the ever craving restlessness which is destroying her. But Winny is not asleep; and presently he hears her say in tones so low that none but himself could at once hear them and understand their meaning,—

“ To live poetry!—yes, surely the time will come, when that will be the only aim of the great ones of the earth! After all, how feeble is the writing of poetry in the comparison! To round one’s life like a true poem; to make it march to rhythm, as though we kept time to unseen angel-feet by our side; to fill it with music, and with everything else that is most sweet, true, loving, grand and progressive; to make it overflow with its own garnered wealth, yet know that the smallest parts into which it is possible to divide that wealth, each whispers to us—‘ Forget not the incalculable treasures left behind where you found me;’ to make it shun, with a glorious disdain, all that is intrinsically common-place, sordid or mean, while taking ever-increasing delight in tending, ad-

vancing, and making more beautiful the simple, the necessary, the domestic and the familiar; a life like our day, visibly springing from, and going to, ineffable glory; waking, like the day, at the challenge of the sunrise to a noble rivalry in duty; sleeping at night with the sunset in all the conqueror's purple and gold, in guerdon of the conquests achieved over real difficulties, in token of the triumph that belongs to those who leave the earth as they rest better than they found it when they rose! Ah yes, to live such poetry! To show to a slowly awakening, but at last roused and grateful brotherhood, that the eternal instincts are the only eternal truths;—the links of the electric chain on which God's own finger seems ever to rest—and that when these instincts fail us, or turn against us, it must be because we have first neglected them, turned against, and outraged them; that our worst troubles, individual or social, are those of our own making, and will be cured whenever we resolutely determine they shall be so; that our social deformities are at once our crime and punishment; our eternal struggles against each other the penalty for not struggling with each other, side by side, to overthrow the barriers of ignorance and selfishness, which alone divide the great family from its wondrous inheritance, its promised land, its golden age, of which the foretaste only was given in the past—like the rainbow spanning the storm—to give promise for the future. This were indeed, not only to live poetry, but all that poetry can ever grasp in its wide-embracing arms, even when yearning with its whole soul for one moment of passionate communion, though

knowing, that in the next, it must let the angel go, as Jacob did ! ”

“ Nay, but Winny, ”—said Mr. Dell, advancing, yet so gently, and with such an admonitory sign from his finger to her to be still, that she might not have time to be startled, “ why not live poetry, and write it too ? You can't place your poet, when he does thus live as well as write, upon a pedestal, as you may your Simon Stylites, and call the world to witness and to imitate. The Press, Winny—the Press—there is your Poet-Pedestal : and books are, in their way, not only an agreeable but a substantial world, as Wordsworth, I think, calls them. But in this I agree with you, that the Poet should not shut himself up in his four-walled room, and think that there alone he can solve the problem of his own life, or the problem of the greater life to which his own serves but as the key-note—that of Humanity ! You meant that, did you not ? ”

“ Perhaps. ”

“ If not, I shall say you were simply finding an ingenious excuse with which to meet me, when I asked for the morning's work, eh ? ” And Mr. Dell smiled his usual smile, but felt it dying out as he remembered the business upon which he had come.

“ Sit, here, Winny ! ” he said ; and he took her by the hand, while the other glided round her waist, and supported her with the gentlest possible clasp, to the sofa. “ I want to have a little talk with you. And you know you are at once so very shrewd, and so very straightforward, that if I don't blurt out at once all I have to say, you not only punish me by

anticipating, but by making things worse than they are." Winny took his hand, kissed it, and turned away in deep silence.

"Well, now darling, tell me, why don't you go out?"

"I will, if you wish me!"

"I know that, but I see you never do it unless I wish; and when you are about the business you make me always regret I said anything on the subject."

"Do I? Forgive me,—but—but all exertion seems a pain to me—walking peculiarly so."

"Then why not ride, and let me lead your horse?"

"I felt worse the last time we did so."*

"And you never sing now. Try."

"O, dearest, tears come if I do try,—not words."

And the tears came then, as though the very word were an irresistible signal of command which they must obey.

"Let them come; let them flow forth, at their own will. Lean here, darling, and weep away all this gathered sadness and gloom. There! There! There! We have been much too wise, much too knowing; have been altogether much too confident in our self-conceit; have had too much faith, God forgive me! in our tricks to impose upon each other. I renounce them henceforth. Yes, we've done with all that now. There! There! Look up! Fear nothing yet. We have done no wrong. The heavenly depths still encircle us. God has not yet died out of his world; or left it, to its own blind ways! O, we of little faith! Come, come,—cheer thee. We will, we must shake off this inexplicable weight—this

gloom—this atheistic despair. Suppose we go to London for awhile? I will take you to one of the most skilful physicians I can find; let us hear what he says." Winny slightly shook her head, without otherwise moving it from where it lay on his breast. And so he tried a different course.

"Will you then, dearest, tell me yourself, in full frankness of soul, what you think may be, or know must be, the matter with you?"

There was no answer for a long time. And the husband rested his own head on the dear head below, and tried to hush the throbbings of his own half-desperate, half-frantic heart, before he again addressed her. And that silence and position seemed to bring a kind of peace to both of them; and he seemed to understand, without another word being said, that she intended to say something to him soon. After another pause he whispered therefore to her, very softly,

"Now, Winny!" And she pressed his hand, which lay in hers, and seemed still reluctant, yet still making no sign of refusal. At last, with a deep sigh, she rose; and then, strange to say, a faint colour appeared on her face, as Mr. Dell caught a side view of it, for she did not look at him, but took his hand, and led him across the corridor towards their bedroom; and he thought, at first, she was going there, perhaps to pray with him, before venturing to say—O God! with what anguish he thought of the possibility of what she might have to say, thus prefaced! But no; it was not to their bed-chamber she went, but to a little dressing-room adjoining it, belonging to her, and which he remembered now to have

noticed that she always kept locked. As they went in, he caught another glimpse of her countenance, and he saw what was decidedly a rosy hue, struggling with the pallor beneath, and new hope sprang into life in his soul at the sight, and wonderfully comforted him.

She led him to an antique-looking walnut cabinet, a kind of personal present from him to her, for it was a great favourite with him, and used to stand in his studio ; but seeing, not long after their marriage, his wife's great interest in it (for it was full of curious, out-of-the-way places, secret drawers, and, as he said, probably untold-of wealth, hidden away never to be discovered, unless by some genius inventive as the maker's or her own), he caused it to be removed to her dressing-room, during her first moments of pleased surprise, and he demanded a kiss by way of purchase-money. He remembered all this now ; and it was to this cabinet she led the way. She took out (rather confusedly) from her pocket, her bunch of keys, and began to try to unlock the doors ; but the key was tapped uselessly against the key-hole so many times by the tremulous little hand, that Mr. Dell took it from her, and opened the cabinet himself. His first glance told him—what, however, he had already divined—the secret his wife now revealed so unwillingly, and yet not altogether without a kind of sweet womanly satisfaction mantling in her modest blushing face. There was displayed on a large shelf, all sorts of tiny, fairy-like fabrics in dress, and in every possible variety of delicate texture—cambric, silk, and satin—some of them possessing hues that almost out-

rivalled the purest and most exquisite colours of the floral world, in roseate pinks and cerulean blues, mingling with dove-like greys and snowy whites, passing off into ethereal lace, which seemed to be the foam, or the crown,—the atmosphere or the flower of all. And they were all obviously for some important yet diminutive little bit of humanity; all these charming structures, which the fond mother had worked at in secret, and hoarded also in secret, and which she had come daily to look at alone—these smallest of caps, these prettiest of hoods—while wishing that the eyes of yet one other person (one only of all the tenants of the globe) might share the secret spectacle. And Mr. Dell saw it, with an emotion and a delight he dared not attempt to express, though his first impulse was to think of the effect of the scene upon her. And he tried once more to conduct and disperse the threatening heart-storm; for though it would not be necessarily one of pain, or danger in itself, it might become both by mere excess of emotion; and the innocent jest was ready upon his very lips, but it was swept off, forgotten in an instant, as his wife turned, and threw herself into his arms, saying,—

“O, dearest, perhaps it is because I do not take from God, as he alone will give it, an increase of our blessings, that I have so suffered, been so miserable, so—so ungrateful!”

Whether Mr. Dell agreed or not, he cared not even to ask himself that day. For a few hours there was a kind of holy sunshine through all the place.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GREY GHOST WALK.

THAT night Mrs. Dell found, as usual, she could not sleep, but was nevertheless conscious of a great relief and change. It was not now the restlessness of the body, betokening pain and danger that troubled her, but the activity of her mind, which seemed suddenly released from its bodily fetters, and at once strengthened and impelled by its long gathering—because unused—force. The wind was raging in tumultuous fury without; the neighbouring trees were swaying and creaking and labouring with their vain protest against the ceaseless disturbance to which they were subject; window-sashes were clamoring in every bed-room to the sleepers to awaken, before they were blown out of their very beds; and once Winny thought she heard the roll of thunder, and she had a sort of fancy that all Nature heard it too, and paused like herself for confirmation, so suddenly hushed did everything become.

There was work in hand outside, and Winny felt there might be work to do inside, and that the one would stimulate and intensify the other. There was a something in the sounds of elemental warfare that always stirred her as Sir Philip Sidney seems to have

been stirred by the sound of a trumpet. It was indeed to her as to him, a sort of call to arms; though she had not his difficulty in choosing between sword and pen, and which Fortune ended by making him equally illustrious with both.

Again and again she tried, on account of her fear of disturbing her husband, to repress this irregular and inconvenient evidence of the activity of the instinct that called her back to poetical labours. But Mr. Dell was enjoying, under the new hope she had given him, the first night of sound placid sleep he had known for some time; and she was glad, alike for his sake and for her own, that it was so. She got up very softly, feeling her way about the room with a sensitive, unerring touch,—for she would not light a candle,—and so dressed herself without the least noise. It was very cold; and she put on an extra dressing-gown, comforting herself with the reflection that she could easily light the fire in her own little room. She was just about to open the door, when a violent crash, as of a branch broken from a tree, caused her to go to the window; and when there, her attention was drawn to a light in Grace's room, which surprised her, for the time was very late,—at least an hour beyond midnight. Winny looked with a vague wish that her eyes could penetrate through the white blind, and see what Grace was doing just then. She had felt recently a strong and growing impression that Grace was secretly unhappy. She could not trace this idea to any period anterior to the accident with the runaway horse; and she could not understand why that incident should have stirred in Grace any other emotions than

it had produced in herself and Mr. Dell, namely, increased affection and sympathy; unless, indeed, the shock had produced some more serious physical injury than they were aware of. But the mere remembrance, at such a time as this, of Grace's courage and self-devotion, inspired in Winny the desire to go to her, speak to her, comfort her if she really needed comfort. With a sigh at the sacrifice of her previous intention,—for she fancied the stream of poetic thought was welling up to the surface of her soul, wooing her by its freshness and sparkling beauty to come and drink of the living waters,—she went in the opposite direction, with a little coiled wax taper in her hand, along the corridor towards Grace's room, which was at some distance. Let me leave her thus on her way, and look, in advance, into Grace's solitary chamber.

A tall, rigidly upright figure moves there, as in a trance, or as in sleep; yet her eyes are open, though fixed in a kind of blank stare. She has just risen from bed, and stands now in her white night-dress, irresolute, as if listening to the storm, or as if expecting some signal. She takes a dressing-gown from the high peg on which it is hung, and puts it on. Her little taper, in a silver candlestick, is already lighted. She takes it up, and with no other covering, opens the external door leading to the winding stone steps, and descends. The light is instantly blown out by the wind; and her long hair flies abroad in a thousand filmy lines, but she heeds it not. She pauses on one stair, and seems to hold the rayless candle to it, while she murmurs—

“Yes, it is still there. How very like. Strange!

Should I find a secret hidden beneath if I were to search? Hidden by some one who would trust to nothing less than stone to keep it down?"

She crosses in the old track, below the cedars. She shrinks not from the cold,—though the snow is pressing in upon her bare feet, and filling with sloppy moisture her velvet slippers, trimmed with a kind of snow of their own, the swan's-down fur. Neither do the wild blasts make her pause, she does not even notice them, though they are sweeping her hair madly to and fro, and at times making it lash her face as with a whip. On she goes, to the avenue, and down towards the spot where lie buried the mutilated remains of the portrait of Mrs. Dell. Notwithstanding the darkness, she fastens upon the very tuft: no snow has fallen there, it is so overshadowed by trees. She takes the tuft gently up, and puts it aside, to be again replaced by-and-by; and then she feels for the bits of card, and as her quest is successful, she exclaims in the same unearthly voice as before,—

"Yes, yes, quite safe! and I may be at ease now! O, for the long, deep sleep that I may now welcome at last!"

Then there was a heavy, painful sigh; and she sat down in the old spot and appeared to ruminate. It was a considerable time before she again spoke—and the tone was strangely low and muffled:—

"No, no hurry; beware of that! No circumstance forgotten—no accident unprovided for. A sufficient cause for every phenomenon. Who will then say there is danger? Idle word! There is no danger

for the soul that is true to itself. No, there must be no discovery possible—no trace left behind to guide the tracking sleuth-hounds of justice to their prey! And then when all is prepared, look yet again, and again—take care—that no single link or member, however apparently worthless or insignificant, be missing. Ay, then strike! Soft. It is done. Come away. No second touch. The blow needs no repetition. Come away. Destroy now for ever all vestiges of the particular instrument! Come away! Leave the deadly miner to work unseen—unsuspected—below life's citadel. Come away,—before it falls in ruins. See, as yet he leaves all outwardly fair and strong; but the hour of vengeance draws nigh—and there will be a sudden sinking of the foundations, a despairing cry—a world peopled by one sand-grain of life the less, and enriched by one pretty ideal ruin the more.

“But why did I save her when her own folly might have sealed her fate—and wrapped all else in impenetrable darkness? Ah! have we all our weak points—and through them is the unseen messenger bidden to strike? Let me consider. This were a case now for a casuist. Had she then died, no one could say it was I who had let loose the sacred fount of life; my previous act must thus have passed into oblivion—nothingness. Why should I not myself have wisely forgotten all but the result; and, innocent in that, have profited by it in peace? But she did not die; they say I saved her life. Then if she does die now—and if here, midway between earth and heaven, a solemn inquest of angels be held

upon her body,—and methinks some great clamour is being raised all about my ears,—may I not avow defiantly, 'She owed that life to me! I took it,—whether before or after the just debt accrued, what matters now!'

"How fair she will look! why do I always see her thus stretched on the low bier—and why can I never by any art or will of mine, drive that constant smile from her face? 'Tis that which troubles me. 'Twill not let me sleep. Smiles? What, and knows all? No, no; hush! I will not tell her as I intended to tell. Rest, fair one, in peace; there shall be no triumph over thy grave. I change and shift strangely. Hadst thou lived, perhaps——!"

Here she again heaved a low, long, labouring sigh, still finding in it no relief.

"How hard grows my pillow, night by night. I will again lie down now. These busy thoughts must be answered at their own time. Well, no more talk: they are answered. 'Twill be daylight soon. Let it not look in upon me to take me at disadvantage while I sleep,—to hear me, perhaps, murmur in bad dreams. Yes, close the curtains. Not you! O God, not,—not you!"

Lulled, perhaps, by the wind, and half-frozen with the cold, she leaned back with her hand on her elbow, and seemed to be, in her thoughts, composing herself to rest on her bed.

When Mrs. Dell had nearly reached Grace's room, she could see no light beneath the door, as she knew she must have seen if one had been burning within.

Had Grace, then, gone to bed? Most likely. She stopped, thought of her little room, and the work which she coveted, and was about to retrace her steps, when the door slammed violently against its frame, and the noise was followed by the slamming to of another door beyond, which was evidently open to the external air, and was admitting a gust of bitter sleety wind, which seemed to freeze Winny to the very marrow. But all physical suffering was forgotten in the alarming thoughts,—“What meant those open doors? Where was Grace?” Winny opened the door from the corridor and went in, guarding the taper carefully the while. She passed to the bed; it was empty, but had been recently occupied, for it was not quite cold. She put down her taper on the dressing-table, and went to the other door—the one opening upon the external staircase—and peered out into the wild black darkness, but could see nothing, except the funereal-looking plumes of the cedars, waving, in strange significance, their heavy, shadow-like branches. She listened, but it was impossible to hear anything; even a cry as dreadful as the one she half-anticipated would suddenly issue from the ground could scarcely have reached her during all that hurly-burly of the elements. She shrank back into the room, shivering with the deadly cold, and oppressed by the deadly fear that possessed her; a fear, however, to which she could give no definite form or name.

She put on some additional clothing hastily obtained from Grace's wardrobe, and sat down, with her old feeling of exhaustion upon her, by the dressing-table, to think what she should do. She was spared

the responsibility of a decision, for the door opened, and in stalked that tall figure, the face of a ghastly, blueish-white, the teeth chattering, but still with the open eyes exhibiting the same blank unconsciousness. For the moment Winny did not understand the state in which Grace was, and her soul was filled with a supernatural dread, as she saw that face turn towards hers without the least sign of recognition,—those eyes pass over her eyes unseeing, nay, as though there were nothing in all creation that could make itself visible to them just then. But soon she began dimly to remember what she had heard of persons walking in their sleep; and she instinctively divined one part, at least, of the secret before her,—that the busy, anxious brain had in some way over-leapt itself, and was suffering for the outrages it had inflicted upon its physical framework.

“How should she wake her? Might not any attempt at direct interference make matters worse?” Winny could not tell. The case was beyond her experience. On the whole, she thought it best to watch her awhile in silence, and be guided by the first gleam of light that might be vouchsafed.

Grace seemed about to go to bed, but stopped, murmuring, and at first Winny could not hear distinctly what she said. But she saw her go to her garments, and look for something, uneasily among them, that she did not appear to be able to find.

“Not here! I could not have left that behind me! No, no. O, it is safe. As though I could lose that!” And there seemed to be a kind of low laugh, but Winny could not be sure if the faint sound really

signified what she supposed. But she saw—with dilating eyes,—what it was that had been missed, and found; it was the portrait of Mr. Dell; and she heard, with an emotion that threatened to unfit her for the calm observation she had resolved upon, the murmured words that now broke forth:—

“Had I not the right to love thee, before thou knewest another? Blame me not, then, if I love thee still! Cruel! Could I weigh, as in a balance, the respective measures of our affection, and say to thee ‘Dost thou love me as thy cousin only? Alas! I bear to thee the love of a wife!’ Could I say that?—and yet not saying it—have I indeed lost thee for ever! Well, well, well—to sleep, and to forgetfulness! Cold! cold! and O, how weary!”

Winnie thought now she would venture an experiment, in the hope of getting her to bed. She would try whether by a certain approximation to her, in tone of voice, and manner, it would be possible to enter into relations with and influence her without breaking the sleep. So she said,—guarding against the least suddenness,—and in a tone at once as indifferent and as dreamy as she could assume,—

“Come, Grace, let me put you to bed!” But she knew not what frightened sentinels were still on guard, though for the moment overcome, within that conscience-smitten brain; nor what cause they or their mistress had for the fearful watch they ever strove ceaselessly to keep up! Winnie saw—while she held her breath in suspense—a change come over the frame. The rigidity relaxed, and was succeeded by tremors and shivering; tears slowly rolled

down; the hands in half unconsciousness were wrung as with secret anguish; spasm followed spasm, as though the very foundations of life would break up before relief came; then sighs, more tears, and a sudden lifting and animating of the whole frame—and, Grace was awake. She looked round in the deepest horror, saying to herself, while still unaware of the presence of Mrs. Dell,

“O my God! What is this? Where have I been?”

“Grace!” And Grace heard, and turned, and glared, as with the eyes of some wild animal, raised by a spear-touch from its sleep; and then she dropped her eyes, and half turned away, and the blood swelled in those wrist-veins, and the strong, beautiful, but dangerous hands, quivered as with an instinct that could not be resisted; and voices were heard, though by her only, whispering, “She has listened to you in your sleep! If she goes away alive, you are lost!” And Grace bent her head, and glanced furtively about, as if to learn if there were stirrers about—or neighbouring sounds—and she drew herself together, as for a spring,—but no—she resists, she suddenly knots her arms upon her breast, drops her head, and gives way to the long pent-up agony and distress, in hysterical laughter.

“Grace! Dearest!”

“Touch me not! No, no; I did not mean that. But you have surprised me—you have been listening?”

“Yes.”

“And you dare to tell me so!” Again there was danger in those blood-shot orbs; but Mrs. Dell either

knew it not, or cared not for it. She answered simply, with an earnestness that attested her truth,—

“Let me tell you all I know,—all I have heard. I saw a light burning in your room, and being restless myself, thought that I, that is, that we might comfort one another. You were not here when I came, but you returned just now through that door.” Grace heard and began to understand her dreams.

“But that is not all?”

“No, I have learnt this instant, that you have loved—perhaps still love—my husband!”

“And —”

“No, that is all.”

“And you—now?”

“Have no fear either of him, or of you.”

“You mean—?”

“To keep your secret, if—if—”

“If what?”

“If you will only love me as well as you love him.”

And Winny, waiting for no answer, threw her arms about Grace's neck, and cried over her, though herself so much younger, as a mother might cry over some supposed lost one regained in peace and honour. Grace did not respond, though the heavings of her heart seemed to Winny to give all the answer she desired.

“Kiss me!” at last, murmured Winny; and she put up her quivering lips, for she had dropped on her knees by Grace, and now, felt as though the child and mother had exchanged—and taken more natural—places. But Grace started up, wildly, and exclaimed in hurried accents,—

"Go—go to bed. You will suffer for this—and I too!"

"Not till I have seen you in bed first."

Grace looked at her—took hold of both her hands, and held her with a painful grip at arm's length, as though she would understand at once the mystery of that strong, loving, immovable soul, in that feeble frame. All the instincts (or what she had been accustomed to believe to be instincts) of hatred, seemed to have rallied and concentrated for that one look, and to demand but some kind of food, or signal, or sign of answering malice, to run riot upon the prey; but the deep blue eyes, though moist with tears, were bright, open, shining, and full of love; and the black host, under their black banner, turned sullenly away, and left the hopeless, helpless, heart-broken commander, to capitulate or surrender, as she pleased. Winny felt the grasp relax; then she trembled herself with the motion imparted to her by Grace's palsied limbs; and at last she heard, to her surprise, in strangely broken hollow tones, the question,—

"If I have wronged you—can you forgive?"

"O, Grace, that I had but something to forgive you, that you might be sure of it!"

"But do you? See—I am not well, and scarcely know what I am doing. Perhaps a few hours hence we may laugh at all this!" Then Grace knelt, with a kind of passionate wilfulness, before Winny, making her sit the while, by holding her hands, and keeping her down on the chair. "Speak! Do you forgive me! Don't play with the words! God help us, we do sometimes play strangely with words—and with—

other things—and find out too late, it is ourselves who have been the victims of the sport. Do you ? ” she demanded, almost fiercely, for the third time.

“ I do,—God knows I do, with all my heart and soul, if indeed there is aught—.”

“ It is very cold, is it not ? ” asked Grace, interrupting her with a feeble, almost wailing voice.

“ Yes, yes ; now then into bed ! O, Grace, and you have been out in such a night as this with nothing on but your dressing-gown over your night-dress ! And your feet—never was ice, surely, so cold ! ”

“ Ay, but never mind, Winny ; are we not all accurately compensated ? Put your hand here—here, child, upon my brow. There’s heat enough there, I think. Your touch is soft. It soothes me strangely. I feel as though I should sleep now. Winny, if one fancied one might never wake again, do you think one might then ask a blessing for another, without having any right to it for oneself ? ”

Winny thought she referred to Mr. Dell, and kissed her, as the best answer in full that she could give. But she added,—

“ Yes, we will both join in that blessing.”

“ Winny, kiss me once more. I wonder if angels laugh or cry at your simplicity. Good night.”

CHAPTER XXIX.

AFTER THE STORM.

AT Mrs. Dell's departure, Grace, who had appeared to be asleep, rose half up in her bed, leaning on her arm, and listened to the footfall as it died away in the distance. Then she got out of bed, locked and tried the two doors, went to a superb-looking Indian dressing box, and removed one part after another, until she uncovered a secret chamber, cut out of the thickness of the wooden bottom, and which was, by various contrivances, so perfectly concealed, that not even the most acute or experienced observer could have detected it either by eye, ear, or touch. She took from thence an exceedingly flat glass vial, and poured from it some drops into a wine-glass, and added water to fill up the glass. She then replaced everything as it was before in the dressing-case—(and which, be it observed, she had been accustomed at times to leave ostentatiously open),—then returned to bed, placing the glass within reach of her hand on a little ledge of the woodwork of her room, hidden by the drapery of the bed. She murmured as she again lay down,—

“Even were this discovered, it would reveal nothing; would even mislead, or guard me. If I am

not better soon, I shall be much worse. Yes, there will probably be fever—delirium—self-abandonment—utter exposure! What I was only beginning to-night, and have just escaped, will then be finely consummated! No, no, that shall never be; I will die mistress of my secret, if of nothing else. They may spare me that knowledge.

“I will, however, wait awhile. I do not think I shall again so far lose myself as not to be capable of drinking this in time; and if I do drink it, and they find me—what this will leave me,—they will grieve, and both think they know and can pity the cause. And as to what they may find afterwards—more nearly touching themselves—why should I disquiet myself about it? The life saved and the life struck at made an even balance; what if I now throw my own life into the scale besides? But I am weary of thinking and speculating.

“Ah, well I may be! I did not reckon upon this. What! are not even the waking hours of actual life, and the dreaming hours of actual sleep, full enough of separate torture for me, body and soul, but they must combine together, into some new, monstrous, and most horrible shape, belonging to neither waking nor sleeping life, and inflict upon me all this intolerable misery and despair! I know, I know. O, you need teach me no more how utterly weak and worthless I am! How given up as prey to I know not what petty demons, who are too cowardly to meet me in the open light, yet too resistless in their own peculiar warfare, when they attack me under the shield of sleep. O me! I can never again willingly trust myself to my one

sole worldly refuge—not even to sleep!—that constant goal to each day's dreadful journey. O me! sleep does not even abandon me—no; she treacherously woos me to destruction! But if there remain yet one spark of courage or strength in my soul, I will conquer this miserable traitor-body; it *shall* obey me. No more sleep-walking, if I never sleep again! No more revelations, even if these drops be the cost of silence.

“But I think I shall sleep now. I know not what angel or devil possesses her that she can thus influence me—body and soul! Though the one raged against her, the other grew calm under her touch. I feel even now overpowered. All, I think, is safe. Yes, no one can enter, till they waken and warn me.”
Grace slept.

And whether it was the natural force of that almost unconquerable will,—unconquerable while attacked only by the weapons it understood and was prepared for, or some inner strength, springing from critical change, and giving new hope,—that kept off the dreaded fever and delirium, and produced simply a slight immediate illness, Grace knew not, when she waked late in the day; but she knew she was better, and for a moment the feeling checked the inexpressible dreariness and anguish of soul with which she always now met the first beams of morning; and it even caused a kind of partial restoration of her old spirits and vigour, as she was able to understand it—measure it—and, in a kind of dull way, enjoy it, while moving about in her chamber, during the operations of dressing.

But this mood was presently succeeded by another,

out of which grew peculiar anxiety and hesitation, which exhibited itself in her aimless and fitful gestures and wanderings. Some thought seemed pressing itself upon her, even to be almost forcibly moving her lips; and it even drew her once to the side of the bed, and seemed to be urging her to kneel there; but she would not—she could not.

“No, no,” she at last cried out passionately, though not loudly,—the feeling seemed too deep for that,—“No more hypocrisy!”

Then there came a soft tap at the door. Grace heard, raised herself to her full height, touched her eyes, shook off, so it seemed, the abstracted mood, and then, with her old graceful sedateness, went to the door and quietly opened it. Mrs. Dell entered with an anxious look, changing quickly to a smile, as she saw Grace already dressed, and looking so much better than she had expected, though her features were strangely pinched and pale. Grace understood and answered her with a half-smile, having in it, however, an unusual tinge of melancholy.

“Yes, I am better. And you?”

“O, much better. I think we dispersed, when we seemed only to be wantonly seeking, storms last night.” Grace faintly murmured something which did not reach Mrs. Dell’s ear, and then was silent.

“Come, then, we two will breakfast together this morning,” gaily exclaimed Winny; “my husband has long since gone to work, and your mother, five minutes ago, was deep in a new novel, and sitting by a tremendous fire in her own room. Come, I will see all ready for us.” And she timidly approached Grace, clasped

her arms round her neck, and kissed her, as she added,—

“Now, be quick, for I really want my breakfast. It is *so* late.” Grace watched her departure, but utterly forgot the injunction. That old mood returned with increased urgency.

“O, what shall I do?” was her despairing, heart-stricken cry; and the hands were tossed wildly in the air, and wrung in a bitterness of agony and remorse that only such strong natures can feel. “O what shall I do?” was repeated in almost a child’s tone of pleading and despair. Then there was much pacing to and fro; then a sudden stop, and a sinking upon the floor in an almost lifeless heap, as though body and soul were dropping prematurely and simultaneously to a common and shapeless ruin. This again was succeeded by a revival, a deep and protracted self-communion, a slow rising once more to the feet to go and lock the door, then a spectre-like gliding towards the bed, and at last a clasp of the hands above the head in irresistible grief and remorse, and a collapse, rather than a voluntary bending, of the knees, and lo! she was kneeling, and broken,—sobbing tones were rising toward Him who alone then could see and hear her:—

“Not for myself, O God! Not for myself, but for her! If thou wilt save her, do as thou pleasest with me!” No more words were uttered, though the heart was probably doing its best to say much more, in a kind of despairing hope, that the Divine Heart would sympathise—even if the Divine Justice condemned and punished. And the head gradually

dropped on the hands upon the white counterpane, and the whole figure remained for some minutes immoveable, in that attitude which it had found so hard to assume, and now found still harder to quit.

Again came the soft tap at the door, and the soft, sweet, though now reproachful smile; but it was answered by one of scarcely less tender or hopeful expression. All that breakfast-time they talked on topics long forgotten, while shutting out those which had been but too recently depressing them. Winny, among other gossip, tried to amuse Grace with some little domestic matters, out of which she was herself extracting some real enjoyment. But beyond the general fact that it related to some conversation with Meggy, and was calculated to trouble Cook, Grace did not know or care, even while she revelled in the sound of the happy voice of the narrator. And so they chatted on; and it seemed to both that the breakfast would never end: it seemed to both they felt as though they wished it never might end.

Winny could not but look and wonder at the new and startling, though fitful signs of life, freshness and buoyancy, that perpetually burst up through the melancholy shadow that overhung Grace; while the latter, on her part, kept saying to herself, as she noticed how much of Winny's lassitude had disappeared,—

“She will live, she will live! Is it no fable, then? —Does He listen to the prayers of a penitent? O, my God! my God!”

CHAPTER XXX.

JOHN SHORT MAKES FOR THE NEAREST HAVEN.

IT was market-day at Leatham, and the carts and waggons jolted and rumbled along the narrow High Street with such a deafening noise, that the gaily dressed farmers' wives could hardly hear their own voices, though they made no inconsiderable addition to the din. The market, as it began to thin, and the prices to get lower, and the voices of the stall-keepers to grow louder, seemed like a cage of screaming birds.

"Only a penny! My last bunch, only a penny!" called out a woman to a couple of townsfolk, who stood admiring the enormous bunch of flowers she held out.

"I'll give you a ha'penny for it," said a deep gruff voice, pretty well known in the market.

"Take 'em," said the woman, and then glancing at his companion, she added: "if you get a missus as close as yourself, you won't come to want soon, I reckon."

Mr. Short smiled, and wrapping a piece of paper round the stalks, presented the flowers to his companion, whose moony face disappeared among them, in a kind of flower-eclipse, till their owner was out of the

noisy market-place. Then, in the quieter parts of the street the face was uncovered; and at each shop a fresh twinkle came to the little round eyes, followed by a fresh exclamation, of "Lor, look here!" or, "Lor, look there!" At each demonstration of delight, the smile upon John's face grew broader, and his personal bearing more erect. Somehow, there seemed no room in that face for the close, sly expression, it usually wore. As he looked around he seemed to see the most familiar sights no longer as being old and wearisome, but with the delighted eyes of his companion. "What was it to him that the little exclamations were vulgar, so long as they sprung from delight of his giving? What was it to him that the scarf or bonnet in the shop window, ticketed "gay but not gaudy," and which put Meggy into ecstasies, was the ugliest in the town? It was just the same pleasure to him to buy it, and watch her peeping in at the corners of the parcel as they took it home. Home? Yes, just that day three weeks back, he had taken a walk in a white waistcoat, with a ring in the pocket, to All Saints' Church, Upper Leatham. Oh Meggy, Meggy! I fear Cook's charge against you of artfulness must be true, or how could all these wonderful things have come to pass under her very nose? Mrs. Dell, I fancy, could best answer that question. To this day it is an unfathomed mystery to Cook.

At last they reached home; and bright and tidy enough the shop looked, as the new boy from the workhouse opened the door. John sat himself down in his usual place, and gave himself up to the amusement of watching Meggy get the tea. First, she

spread out all her purchases on a side-table, and then bustled about, still casting admiring glances towards the table.

"Come, come, let's see it on!" said John, as he watched her wistful looks towards the "gay, but not gaudy," bonnet. With much trembling of the little red fingers, the bonnet was mounted on Meggy's head, and duly admired.

"Lor, suppose Cook should ever see me in it!" said Meggy, trembling at the vividness of her own conception.

"Ah!" said John, amused at her fright. "This was the very day she was to come."

Off went the bonnet, and poor Meggy's face, as it looked into his, grew so exactly what it used to be in its fright and dismay, that John could not help laughing.

"Come, Meg, no more of them rompins, you know. I've promised Cook to cure them for once and for all."

"Lor, John! Promised! Gracious goodness; when?"

"O, when I wrote her a letter the other day;—a letter that won't hurry her, I'll be bound."

"Did you? O, what did you say," asked Meggy, opening her eyes to their fullest extent.

"Why, I told her I'd taken her advice, and got married."

"Lor, I'm so sorry! She'll worret poor Missus to death with her Saturday humours now. Didn't you say nothing to pacify her like!"

"O, yes: I said, that wishing to express my gratitude

for her kindness and *motherly* care of me, and knowing that you were her plague,—”

“Well, I’m sure!” interrupted Meggy, with a saucy toss of the head.

“Knowing you were her plague,” repeated John, “I thought I couldn’t do better than take you off her hands, and cure ‘them rompins,’ and marry you. And I said that some day when I’d got you round a bit, I hoped she’d come and see us, and be friends.”

“Lor, John, I wish you hadn’t!” said Meggy, looking round her, with eyes full of alarm. “Suppose she comes some day when you’re out, and—”

“No, no,” answered he, with a low chuckle. “No fear o’ that; *she* won’t show her face here in a hurry.”

Just as the tea was ready the boy came in; and Meggy, seized with one of her little overflowings of happiness, laid her hand on the back of his head, and crammed a lump of sugar into his mouth.

“Now let him speak, Meg. What is it, boy?” said his master.

“It’s a woman as wants to see you;” the boy answered, pointing towards the shop.

“Ask her business,” said John, coolly, and turned to take his cup of tea from Meggy. But what ails Meggy, as she holds out the tea? Her face has become such a picture of alarm and blank dismay, that John’s eyes hastily follow the direction of hers, and they behold, standing in the doorway, looking more awfully inflammable than ever, Cook!—umbrella, black bag, and all! Aye, it is Cook herself who gazes at the bonnet on the chair, and then at the other purchases on the

side-table, as if to gather fresh force for the storm she is about to let loose over their heads. And now she looks at the pair, and like two guilty culprits they wince beneath her gaze. One moment she maintains a grim and awful silence, and then, when she speaks, it is in a tone of bland and cutting satire.

“So you see, I’ve called to know how you both are!”

Meggy and John indistinctly murmured something about thanks, and taking a chair, which so completely roused Cook, as adding insult to injury, that, dropping her satirical tone, she burst out, in one of stern indignation,

“What are you talking about! Ain’t you afeard o’ chokin’ in your wickedness, a gorging there! O Meg”—and her head shook inexpressible wrath—“God’amity forgive me for goin’ agin friends and everybody when they says to me, ‘Take that baby, Mrs. Touch, and you’ll go an’ ruin yourself;’ but I looked at you, a bit of a thing as couldn’t tell its hands from its feet,—not that you can do much more now, though, for the matter o’ that—and says I to myself, ‘Shall I be for flinging it out in the world afore it’s cut its teeth?’ No, I couldn’t. I kep’ you, though I know’d I was agoin agin Providence to do it; and I fed you, and clothed you; yes, and spent a fortin besides in doctor’s stuff, for them rompins in your head; and wore myself out a tryin’ to make a decent Christian of you: and what’s bin my reward? Why, to find out it were a young wiper as I’d bin doin’ all this for, as ’ud turn and sting me at its first opportunity.”

“Come, come, Cook, don’t be too hard on her,” ventured John.

“As for you,” Cook exclaimed, turning the full blaze of her anger on John, as soon as she recovered her breath, “I ain’t a goin’ to waste a breath on you, no more than to say, you ha’ got your reward. I don’t want to make mischief—I’d scorn to do it—but John Short, I had better hopes on you than that you’d go and throw yourself away on that wiper, as ’ll drag you and your business down to the ground ; and—but there !—I ha’ got no more to say ; go your own ways to ruin, both of you ; but mark my words, it’s a hunion as’ll come to a bad end ! Mind, I don’t say the house ’ll come tumblin’ about your ears ; but you, you wixen ! and you, John Short, ain’t you afraid, I want to know, o’ something horrid a happenin’ to you ?”

“Cook, there’s bin enough o’ this. Do hold your tongue now.”

Was it Meggy who spoke ? Cook asked herself that question, and turned and looked at her from head to foot ; very much in the same manner as a lioness might turn and look upon a little kitten that dares to put its back up at her. But Meggy met the Cook’s gaze with her little round eyes full of defiance, that soon found vent in words :

“Yes ; I won’t have John bullyragged ! You’ve had your spite on me, and if that ain’t enough, you may just take yourself off,—so there ! It ain’t no good makin’ eyes at me, Cook ; I tell you I ha’ borne it long enough, and I shan’t bear no more on it, no more shan’t John. He’s my husband, and nobody shan’t put on him. We ain’t done nothing wrong, and we ain’t afraid o’ chokin, or having the house fall ; and what’s more, we ain’t afraid o’ you, Cook, or anything

you says ; and I wish you'd never show your face here again, a tryin' to frighten them as ain't got nothing to be frightened on ; there ! So I tell 'ee."

Gradually the expression on Cook's face changed from one of contempt to astonishment ; and though the words "young wixen" and "termagant" escaped her lips, while Meggy, in the full-blown dignity of outraged wifhood, was speaking, she began to look on her almost with respect. John was no less astonished. Taking his pipe from his mouth, he turned and stared agape at Meggy ; and mixed with his admiration there was a curious expression on his face, as though he were mentally calculating how far this new trait in her character,—which he had not bargained for,—might be agreeable and desirable under other circumstances. He could hardly believe his eyes, or his ears, though both told him, that Meggy was actually putting Cook down,—that Cook was silenced, almost crest-fallen ! It was almost too much. His heart was touched by the sight. The small beer, which had never ceased fermenting in John's brain, was forgotten now in pity for Cook's pitiable state.

"Nay, nay, Meg, you're a going too far ;" and he got up and stood between them. "Come, Cook, I will say you've been too good a friend to both of us for me to see you turned out of the house. I shouldn't be happy now—upon my word I shouldn't, if I didn't think we should have many a comfortable cup o' tea together yet."

"John Short, be so good as to let me open that door ;" was all the answer Cook made to this unusually lengthy speech of John's.

"Nay, nay, Cook; have you forgotten what friends little Ailsie and I were? She wouldn't like us to part this way."

Now Cook was not one to go into hysterics, or even to let a reconciliation seem like one; but she was touched at the mention of her little girl who had died in John's arms, and her mind was soon made up.

"There, there, let me alone, do;" said she tartly to Meggy, who was trying to undo her bonnet strings. "I ha' got hands o' my own, ain't I?"

John sat down, happy; for he could tell by Cook's tone that all was right. But Meggy, whose head was as yet hardly strong enough to bear all this extra excitement, had thrown herself into a chair, her apron over her head, and began a hearty, good cry.

"There, there, hold your blubbing, do!" said Cook; "and give us a cup o' tea."

Meggy insisted upon Cook's taking the honours of the tea-table upon herself, but Cook resolutely declined: she knew now what footing she was on at the saddler's house, and intended to keep it. And, to do her justice, she did keep it; for never did John, who maintained a pretty sharp eye upon her movements, find her encroaching in any way upon Meggy's rights. Yes, many a happy afternoon she spent with them. Her long sideboard has found a home where she herself can come whenever she may need one, in John's back parlour. To this day the diamonded counterpane remains unfinished, always ready to remind her, as she draws bit by bit from the greasy black bag, of those fresh mistakes, and that new crop of blighted hopes.

CHAPTER XXXI.

GOD'S MERCY AND GOD'S JUSTICE.

THERE is a hard lesson to be learned, and one that even energetic and logical natures often shrink from in their tenderness of soul towards themselves, sometimes even when that tenderness is called forth by the sufferings of others. Mark, how little it is they ask in their unexpressed involuntary appeal! "Set aside, O Father, thy immutable law, which is but another word for thy felt—but in its operation—unseen will, and govern man, as he governs himself, capriciously! Make cause and effect no longer intrinsically one; give them at least an occasional divorce! O, give us grapes from these convenient thorns! Not justice, we ask, but mercy!" Alas, how can even Omnipotence itself answer such appeals, if Justice and Mercy be in heaven exactly the same? From our five or six feet human pedestal, we range in fancied power over the universe of things, deeming we see all—understand all—that is essentially necessary to us as the preliminaries of correct judgment; and, so prepared, to this phenomenon we attach lovingly the name—Mercy: to that shrinkingly the word—Justice; unconscious that all the while we are merely bringing down to our own paltry level His sublime code, when

we should be acknowledging our ignorance, humbly seeking enlightenment, and going on perpetually striving to rise to the height which that code, by its very existence, shows us we were born to aspire to.

Yes, this is a hard lesson to learn, as Grace now finds. Probably it would become a still harder one for humanity at large, if she, and such as she, could succeed in changing it to their own wishes, even when those wishes cease to be selfish. Grace has had one first gleam of sunshine, which, perhaps, was but an emanation of that Divine pity, which we know, through the Saviour's own lips, is felt for even the worst of sinners. Justice but Pity, Pity but Justice; or to substitute the larger attributes to which they belong, Truth and Love,—these are the golden wheels on which rolls the eternal chariot. But Grace will know no more the brightness or the genial glow! The clouds are gathering resistlessly, never again to leave her, until the end.

For, like herself, Mrs. Dell has experienced only a brief but delicious moment of relief and re-action, to break the depressing monotony of her recent physical state. The sunny brightness was as delusive as the last flickering of the fire before its extinction. Ere many days had passed, Winny was lying through the whole weary, weary period, from sunrise to night-fall, on the sofa; and receiving regular (instead of, as before, merely occasional) visits from the Doctor. That gentleman pronounced her case to be one of naturally low physical energy, further complicated by a vital shock from the accident with the horse; and, above all, made chiefly dangerous by the promise of maternity. On the other hand, he thought, that if only the critical

period indicated by the last-named point of danger could be safely passed through, she would rally, and be in better health than she had ever been. He could not say there was nothing dangerous in the case, but it was to him perfectly simple—O, perfectly simple! he assured them; and all they could do was to keep her quiet, very quiet, in mind and body, and wait.

Grace heard these sentences. A little while before, when all men and agencies were, but to her fancied supremacy, merely so many automata, she would have said to herself—"Exactly! just what I expected you to say—intended you should say! How well the puppet works!" But now the Doctor's words fell like the fingers of a spectre upon her throat, crying to her,—Ha! and thou thoughtest to escape me! But she would not dwell on the words,—she strove hard not to dwell on them, now that there was at least a duty to be performed; and she found or created a kind of heroism of soul ready for her difficult task. She must hope on, having no hope; smile on while her heart was breaking; keep up to the latest possible moment, in Mrs. Dell's thoughts, the idea that she believed she would recover: that was now the sole chance of recovery. One thing, at least, she would make Mrs. Dell understand—that she, Grace, looked upon her own life as involved in the dread issue, though she dared not intimate the nature of the solution that was eternally tempting her acceptance.

And thus several days passed on, Mr. Dell contenting himself a little longer, under the assurance of the Doctor that it was really impossible to do more than

he was doing; and, persuaded to inaction by the entreaties of his wife that he would not leave her, even for a few hours, as he had proposed, in order to go to London and consult some eminent medical man. She was equally urgent with him not to bring any stranger down: "He would only add to her distress," she said.

"Wait, wait," she continued. "Perhaps all will yet be well." And he waited, though misgivingly, understanding, as he believed, her hope.

On the last day that week—a day that nearly all in the house had forgotten to connect with its usual concomitants of gladness—Christmas Eve,—the Doctor, after bidding Mrs. Dell a good morning as usual, and wishing her the compliments of the season, seemed to be rather struck with something in her pulse, or in her look, or her answers; for while he kept up—good and kindly though positive man that he was!—a cheery tone to Mrs. Dell until he had fairly got out of her sight, he then hastily stopped one of the servants, and asked if she would request Miss Addersley to step down to him; he would wait for her there in the little parlour in the hall.

The message was doubtless fearful enough to come from such a man, and to be sent to that particular woman. But the effect was not the same that it would have been a few weeks before. Every drop of blood, it is true, left the already pallid cheek and brow, and the knees quaked, and the flesh crept; but still it was not the personal fear of discovery, and punishment, that was now producing this alarm, it was that Grace had divined the coming fiat—"She will die!"

She hurried down to satisfy herself as quickly as she might, whether that were the truth; and to consider, if so, what further work, if any, might remain for her on this side the grave. She came in hurriedly, anxiously, but inquiringly; and with looks so full of the natural feelings that the Doctor expected there, that they would of themselves have allayed any slight suspicion, if such a thing had entered his mind. But he had no such thought. After some kindly preface, he said,—

“I fear I must break to you sad intelligence. No, no!” he exclaimed, seeing Grace clasp her hands across her knees, and drop on a chair, struggling to moderate the anguish of that moment of full and fatal conviction; “I don’t mean to say there is absolutely no hope. But I do think it possible she might go off suddenly in a few hours. Her husband, therefore, ought to know. It might be a comfort to him to call in some one else. I thought you might, perhaps, prepare him better than I could.” Grace only waved her arms in a kind of frantic resistance to the idea. So he continued, “Yes, it is very sad,—so young, so fair a creature! And, I am told, one so richly endowed by nature.”

“I—I will tell him,” said Grace, with a kind of spasmodic energy, and desiring, at any cost, to get rid of the Doctor, whose every word inflicted upon her the most exquisite pain.

“That will be best. I will be on the watch day and night. If I am not at home, I will leave word where your messenger can find me in a very few minutes. And I will borrow his horse, if my own is knocked up, or out of the way at the instant. Pray

keep up your own spirits, for he may sadly need you. I fear he will! Indeed, Miss Addersley,—it is too late to delude you with false hopes,—I am sure of it.”

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE LAST DREAMER AWAKENED.

MR. DELL had not noticed the change in the Doctor's face and manner; for, in accordance with his usual custom, he went away when the Doctor came, in order to leave him alone with his patient and then meet him at his departure to learn what he thought as to his wife's state. He was very restless; and finding the Doctor longer than he expected in coming to him in the antique-room, where he was accustomed to wait, he moved first to one place, then to another, and at last wandered into the studio.

He was sorry he had done so, for what he saw there reminded him of the single gleam of hope they had all experienced a few days back, and during which he had drawn out from the numerous canvasses that stood sloping against the wall, the picture he had begun to paint in illustration of the ballad of Lady Hester, and had placed ready upon the easel. A sort of unpleasant fascination drew him now to look upon his work. But the artist seemed to be dead in him, and he could only look at it with dulled and pre-occupied eyes. Still, as he looked, and as his thoughts ran off, from moment to moment, almost

tremblingly, to ask "what would be the Doctor's report to-day?"—he became conscious of an altogether new aspect that the picture was presenting. It seemed, as he gazed, to become strangely personal. Lady Hester and the timid bride of the ballad faded into an obscurity scarcely less dense than that from which they had originally been drawn; while their representatives, Grace and his own wife, correspondingly emerged into a startling, vivid presentment of their actual selves. Still he looked; and, to his horror, found new and hideous fancies thronging into his brain; surging through it like a confluence of great black corrupting streams, which he could not stop: but which paralysed his very soul by their noxious fumes. And, as though these fancies were not enough, facts,—facts never dreamed of till now as of the least significance, came also in their wake in sinister and multitudinous array; each with its own burden of evil suggestion to lay at his feet. His head throbbed, and his eyes seemed to be starting from their sockets, as they remained riveted upon the expression of deadly malignity which Grace there fastened upon the alarmed, but half-playful countenance of his wife.

He said nothing, even to himself. His whole conception was too wildly impossible. He would never be able to forgive himself if he did not root out at once such a diabolical growth, the seed of which could only have been sown by the Father of Lies! Then he remembered the incident of the ride, and his own moral certainty that on that day he would have taken home a corpse in the place of a living wife, if Grace had not intervened. But he also remembered Grace's

love for him,—her disappointment at his marriage,—and her recent refusal of Payne Croft.

He wiped the dews from his face and head; then he went to a little closet where there was water, and took a tumbler-full and drank it off; he then returned, as though more manfully to confront the hideous but unreal phantom his own mind had conjured up. In vain! It was impossible now to resist the impression conveyed by the almost sublime hatred he had himself admiringly transferred from Grace’s face and gestures to those of the imaginary Lady Hester.

But at last he remembered, and with a sort of smile and a sigh, implying some relief, that it was after all his own work that he was gazing upon; and that, perhaps, it was he, and not Grace herself, who was responsible for the expression that now so alarmed him. And he spoke then,—

“I am growing nervous, I suppose, and womanish. This will never do. But, however, I won’t throw away the alarm I have had.” He walked up and down for a minute or two, then seated himself at a little table, and wrote a hurried note:—

“Bletchworth, Morning of Christmas Eve,
11 o’Clock.

“DEAR ARCHY,—

“Come to me, I beg of you, within an hour after you receive this. Let your wife follow during the day, and, when she arrives here, take the management of the house; neither my wife nor Miss Adersley are able any longer to attend to it: both are ill. Make the best arrangements you can, for a

protracted absence from the farm. Your mother can manage. Send for her, if she has not already joined you. But come, as you value my friendship: I need you. Go round, before you come here, to the Telegraph Office at Leatham, and send a message to London to Dr. M——, to come to Bletchworth Hall instantly, by express, or if necessary, by special train; and to transmit an immediate answer. Leave another and similar message at the office to Dr. S——, to be forwarded only in the event of the answer to the first message implying any delay. Read this twice to make sure. The addresses of both gentlemen will be readily found by the people at the office in London.

“B. DELL.”

He sealed the letter, rang the bell, and said to the woman who entered,—

“Send George instantly with that to Norman Mount Farm. He must go as fast as the horse will carry him. But warn him to be careful!—no flurry—no accidents!” The servant took the letter, and went away.

Mr. Dell then went to the picture, lowered it deliberately from the easel to the floor, and ran his knife along the edge, all round, till the canvas dropped from the frame. He then cut the picture to pieces, and threw the fragments into his waste-basket, saying,

“Whatever happens, I will never again look upon this. Every bit of it, even now, seems to poison me by the mere finger-touch! How very long the

Doctor is this morning! But he amuses her at times, and then is apt to be garrulous." The servant now re-entered with a letter—not his own—in her hand, saying,

"From Miss Addersley, sir."

O, the anguish that shot through the frame of the strong man at these simple words!—it was impossible, he thought, to mistake their meaning. He had borne all bravely till now. Yes, doubtless, the Doctor had gone away unwilling to speak personally to him, her husband! And now Grace herself also lacked courage to come to him. Yet that was hardly like her, he remembered. Again he rallied his wandering senses, and began to open the letter with fixed, steady eyes, and clenched teeth. But he paused to speak to the servant.

"Is George off?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. You need not wait." She went away. Mr. Dell felt at that moment strangely conscious of all that was passing about him in the world of things; yet strangely conscious, too, that there was something waiting that would give him different occupation. He opened the letter, and perceived to his surprise that it began abruptly, and not with the words that he had foreseen, as he thought, so clearly, of "O, my dear, dear, cousin;" the preface to a story which would then no longer need telling. He was still more surprised to see what the first few words really were, though half relieved by them, as being so unlike what he had anticipated.

—————"I want to tell you a strange story, and at

a strange time. My brain is already beginning to wander, but I will try to keep to my tale rigidly—ay, rigidly, as it has kept to me.

“There was a child in one of the slave states of America—I need not tell *you* her name or the name of the state. People said she was beautiful and fortunate—certainly she was not happy: in truth she was very miserable. Her mother, though caring little about her, except as a pretty plaything, indulged her in every possible way. Her nurse, a powerful Mulatto, alternately petted and tortured her—now wooing her with tender love, now paralysing her with a kind of insane violence—until what little heart the child had refused at last to be any longer tampered with or experimented upon, and grimly shut itself up to pine or to die: which it might be no one cared, not even herself, then.

“Fearful as is the hurrying and inexorable march of Destiny just now, I must give you one picture of that child and that time. A slave is to be executed—her mother’s slave—once a great favourite of the household, and the nurse takes the child to a hill within sight of the scaffold, and holds it up that it may the better enjoy the spectacle. O, but she was a kind nurse! She taught the child as she grew toward girlhood, strange secrets—precious secrets—dangerous, deadly secrets. No, ask no questions! I will not answer them; on my soul I will not! The knowledge here shall die with me. But these secrets haunted the child’s imagination, and inspired a yearning to try their power. And the Mulatto once showed her their power; but no one knew except those two;

and no human life was then affected, so it mattered little. Can you guess now the state of that child's heart, or are you already guessing what is to come? Its intellect was taken equally good care of. The only principle imparted to it was that of self-indulgence; the only development afforded to it was that of its self-conceit; the only aspirations favoured were those which ever urged the soul to crave for more and more wealth, social display, influence, and power. The child threw so bravely in all these things, that she would probably have outstripped her instructors had full scope been given.

"She grew in years, and became an object of desire, emulation, and envy, as the rich heiress. Her father was supposed to be rich: it was a mistake; he was only self-indulgent. At his death a bare pittance remained for the daughter and widow.

"Do you recognise the original of the portrait, here so feebly sketched? I cannot: the words I write are so unlike what I intended to have written. But, in truth, I am no longer interested in dealing with the character and motives of a person so weak, worthless, and evil. Cousin, I send you what seems to be the mental history—but it is, in truth, only the cowardly excuse—of *a murderess!*

"Ay, clutch the paper in your hands! Gaze up into heaven, and down into hell, and ask help or explanation from either. Begin the maddening march from wall to wall, from bar to bar of this life-cage that I have now continued so long. But come back and read to the end, and be thankful, as you do it, you are not as I am. O, cousin, could you sit down

for one moment with me upon this floor, and look thence upon the past and the future of us both, you would say you have indeed much to be thankful for.

“I rave, I know, while trying to be very calm. Your wife is dying, and it is by my hand! There is the confession, made in a sane mind, which I shall sign presently, in letters large enough for a world to read them!

“I have just enough of the semblance of good left in me not to go to your wife; although my soul,—Pah! —the soul of a murderess—you will cry! Well, cousin, something,—be it soul or sense,—yearns, weakly enough, but very passionately to lie at her feet for but one minute before she knows all, or even after; for I think I could venture to meet her and confess all, and ask for that one moment, even after;—if you did not know; for she will be more merciful than you, cousin; but you might think I should thus increase her danger; and although I know now she must die, and will not let you suffer as I have suffered from false hopes, yet I will not have you tell me,—‘You have twice killed her!’

“Say nothing yet to my mother. There will come a time when no one will need to say much to her; things will be so very plain.

“By my own will, I wait here, your prisoner, in my own room. I await here—those you will send to me. What you do, do quickly, or your justice may be baffled. I cannot trust myself much longer to these guilty hands.

“GRACE ADDERSLEY.

"P. S.—She who writes to you may be spared the desire to lift off even one feather's weight from the burden that is dragging her down—down! Something—no matter what—of late changed me. God then punished me with hope:—hope of undoing all. The Doctor has this morning settled that. I have no dread of being discovered. That is truth. Why I discover myself, you may perhaps, one day understand. That is my one consolation,—don't take it away. And O, cousin, dear, dear cousin, don't see me, please, ever more."

* * * * *

Let me for a time pass a veil over the heart and mind of him who read this letter.

* * * * *

When, an hour or two later, Archy with hurried step came to the door, and tapped, he found Mr. Dell sitting in a chair in a darkened corner, a letter in his hand, and staring senselessly upon him, as though recovering from a trance. He then rose, took no notice of Archy's earnest, sympathetic look or outstretched hand, but said in a hard voice, while his eyes looked almost the colour of blood, "Read that." He put Grace's letter into Archy's hand, and then taking no more notice of him, began to write. When he had finished a short note and sealed it, he handed it to Archy, saying,—

"Send that to Mr. Staunton. He is the nearest magistrate." Then seeing that Archy was so overcome with horror as to be absolutely helpless, he said,

"No matter. Recover yourself. We have work

to do now. I will dispatch this, and come back." He went out, and left Archy for a brief period to make acquaintance with a grief that taught him, at last, what child's play had been all his previous sorrows beside this.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A MIGHTIER SHADE ABSORBS THE SHADOW.

WHEN the good Doctor left Mrs. Dell, guarding, as he thought, so carefully his terrible discovery from her, he had forgotten how very much more eloquent in their truthfulness might be looks, and tones, and even bodily movements, than words: and that his patient, a keen and deeply interested observer, had her own reasons for suspecting his kindly deception, and her own reasons for not wasting one of the few precious hours that might yet remain to her of life in useless illusions intended to solace herself or her friends.

She began writing immediately a variety of memoranda—chiefly relating to gifts and remembrances, each accompanied with some tender or kindly, and even, in one case, a school-friendship, of pleasant remark. Then she wrote to her parents. O, that was indeed a hard task! But even that,—exquisitely painful as it was, was lightened, after God's own fashion, by the consciousness of the greater things that were yet to be done. Poor old couple! If anything can smooth for you the weary pillow, on which night by night, you will henceforth lay your heads, and still ask, "How many times longer must we do

this?"—it is such a letter as that she has just written to you.

Thus some time passed before she began to wonder at the absence of her husband and of Grace. After a while she grew uneasy. The former had scarcely left her side for many weeks, except during the briefest and most necessary intervals. She rang the bell, which hung ready over her head, and when the servant came she bade her seek Mr. Dell. Minutes elapsed, and still he came not. Again she rang, and asked for Miss Addersley.

"I think she's in her room, ma'am."

"Beg her to come to me."

The servant went, and did not return, and still Grace came not. At last, when Winny was growing really excited, Jean entered; and, notwithstanding her own state, Winny could not help saying a word to her as to the great change in her appearance, she was so wonderfully altered, so much stouter, rosier, happier looking. But Jean listened as one who comprehended not, and seemed only intent on the duty of lavishing upon Mrs. Dell all that she might venture to show of personal care and overflowing affection, and to engage her in quiet yet engrossing conversation. But heart and head were secretly at war. Jean was ill at finesse or scheming, and Winny quickly perceived and understood Jean's behaviour.

"Jean, there is something on foot which you are trying to cover. What is it?" Jean tried hard to shape her lips to the "No, no," that was hovering upon them, but they would not lend themselves to the lie, and only quivered helplessly with the attempt.

"Jean, where is my husband? Where is Grace? I will see them both—and here; yes, weak as I am—nay, dying—it is useless, Jean, to conceal it any longer, for I know what the Doctor has been saying—I will instantly seek them both. Say so. Haste! No words, Jean; begone! Life ebbs fast! O, quick."

To such a message there could be but one answer. Mr. Dell, who had till this moment intentionally kept away from his wife, determined to act, and perceiving alike the uselessness and danger of discussion,—and O God! thought he, what a discussion!—before her, now said to Jean,

"I will come." She then went from him to seek Grace. "We are but straws now in the hands of Fate. Contention is useless. One duty alone have I to see to—and, God willing, that *shall* be seen to. Not even she shall move me there." So murmured Mr. Dell, as he paced up and down the studio, reluctant still to meet the gaze of his wife, or to answer her inquiries.

While he thus delayed, Jean returned hurriedly, saying in a still more frightened voice,—

"Miss Addersley is very ill. She refuses to go to Mrs. Dell unless you expressly consent."

"Let her go then,—first. But warn her not to stay. I shall be there within ten minutes, whether she be gone or not."

Jean found Grace as she had just left her, sitting dressed as for a departure, except that she had no bonnet on. The chair was by the window, and the eyes of

that thin spectre-like form were fixed in the old direction, under the cedars, and the lips were faintly murmuring,—

“Cruel! cruel! Why this delay?” Then, after a pause, she continued,—“I wonder whether the bits of card beneath yonder tuft are quite rotten and worthless—like me; or whether they might, if recovered, be put together again, and so bring back for me (whom nothing can bring back) her face, and brow, and hair, and smile. Ay, it’s no use denying now, it is a sweet smile! O God, a bitter sweet for me! I suppose they would let me keep that mangled image of her in my cell, and look at it now and then? If they did but know, they might be satisfied—quite satisfied, even as an increase of punishment. Well, well.”

Jean gave the message; and it seemed to rouse a kind of artificial life in Grace. She said,—

“He is very kind. Come then, Jean. No, I can walk, thank you. Do not touch me. You will be sorry if you do, by-and-by.”

“O, Miss Addersley, I know all!” Jean’s bursting heart would not allow her to say more.

“Ay, such news flies fast. I shall realise my position soon!”

Jean seemed still to wish to help Grace, who, finding herself faltering in her walk, consented to take the proffered arm.

Mrs. Dell had, in the satisfaction of the answer she had received that both were coming to her, dropped back to rest; and to allay the excitement she had temporarily given way to, she shut her eyes, and

began to measure, step by step, the probable nature of the brief mortal journey that remained to her ; and to yearn for the instant when she might say to those two—" We have done now with the things of the world ! Come, husband and sister, let us enjoy our last communion of love. Give me that, and have no fear."

Suddenly she heard a breathing low down, yet close to her ; and she turned hastily, and saw that head discrowned now of all its fair circling plaits, wild, dishevelled, buried in those long, fair, but no longer jewelled hands. Yes, Grace was kneeling there, abased in body as in soul, unable to speak ; but her attitude told all.

" Grace ! " Thick, heaving, convulsive sobs were the only possible answer.

" Grace, dear, have I indeed something serious to forgive to you ? "

" No, it is beyond forgiveness," the voice hoarsely replied.

" Is it my life ? "

" Yes."

" Nothing more ? "

" If there could be aught more,—No."

" I am sorry now to die, Grace ; but can you not believe me if I say I do forgive you, from my inmost soul ? " Grace was silent, and seemed only to cower and shrink more and more down towards the ground. " Grace, I must tell you now, that since that dreadful night I began slowly and unwillingly to suspect your and my secret ; and I—I am a woman—and life was very sweet to me. No, no—hush ! O, hush ! listen to

me, if now you care differently for me than you did! Yes, life was very sweet to me; and I thought at first I could not forgive you. But when I saw what you suffered, and knew its cause,—when I felt that you were beginning to change in feeling towards me, and to repent, and struggle for instead of against me,—and, O, Grace, when I remembered that I owed that very life to you—”

“Spare me—spare me, in His name!”

“O, then my heart yearned to be at peace with you, and to forgive you.” There was then a pause; for Mrs. Dell, who had with difficulty made herself intelligible, became too faint to go on. The silence was only broken by those terrible breathings and gasps. “I think, Grace, if you will let me, I can even yet love you. Hark! what are those sounds, Grace,” resumed Winny shortly. “Surely I hear strange voices in the house. — Listen, Grace! — What is it?” But Grace still cowered by the side of the sofa, understanding too well what the sounds meant, but utterly regardless of them, except in so far as they might affect Mrs. Dell, or her own proximity to her. But she was powerless alike for word or action, for good as well as evil, thenceforth. She knew it, and was silent.

The door opened, and Mr. Dell entered. How terrible was the change in his appearance! He looked suddenly aged; suddenly changed from a genial, kindly, courteous gentleman, to a minister of wrath, whom neither love nor sorrow could move for one instant from the duty assigned. Behind him came a gentleman, Mr. Staunton, accompanied by his clerk; and

behind them appeared yet a third man, whose office needed no explanation. Mrs. Dell started up, and confronted them all, with flashing eyes that burned upon her white face like red lights upon the snow. Mr. Dell saw, but he shrunk not.

"Winnie, they come to arrest a murderer. See," he said to those behind him as he pointed to Grace—"there she lies!"

Grace then rose to her full height, and without looking at any one, said,—“I am ready;” but even as she said the words, she would have fallen upon the ground, but that Jean, who had crept in behind the strangers, now caught her, and held her up, while some one placed a chair.

“Mr. Dell,” said Winnie then, in a voice of strange dignity and reproach, and it made him pause when no other earthly tones could have produced that effect, “I have, in our too brief married life, never asked you, I think, yet for one earnest favour. Will you now grant me one?”

“What is it?” inquired her husband, in a tone that she had never before heard come from him to her.

“That you beg these gentlemen to withdraw for a few minutes,—if only that I may die in peace.”

“Winnie! Winnie!” groaned the miserable husband; but for the moment she heeded him not, but waved her hand, and so he spoke to them, and the men—all but he—went out. And they three were there alone,—the husband, and the wife, and she whose name henceforth was—the Murderess!

“Yes, dear, dear, husband, I am dying; you know it, perhaps, already; if not, let me tell you now.

What good can it do to me, if this heart-broken penitent, who has revealed her own guilt, dies too,—except in God's own time?"

"Justice! Justice!" was Mr. Dell's low but inexorably stern reply.

"And to what will Justice condemn her worse than she now experiences?"

"Death!"

They were interrupted by a hollow sepulchral voice, that now broke in upon them, as though not belonging to their sphere.

"I *am* dying! in effect am dead already. I foresaw this, and—and—I took advantage of it to spare myself the last indignities of law. Forgive that if you can. I did not wish to save myself from any exposure that you might justly subject me to. I thought only to have died a few hours later when I had left this place, and when no one need have cared about me any further, except to be sharers of the universal relief that so black a spot upon humanity had disappeared."

Mr. Dell heard this, and saw at once there was no more to be done. He only wished now that she were out of his sight.

"Husband!" Mr. Dell heard the imploring tone, but turned away.

"O, my dear, dear, husband, shall we, who have been so united in heart and soul, as, I think, no two human beings ever were before, be disunited in death?"

"Disunited! O God, send her away!"

"I will not! As I stand here upon the last edge

of earth, and gaze out upon the terrible abyss before me, I swear to you I will not! I have forgiven her—you must forgive her.”

“Never! never!”

His wife sunk back with a feeble moan, and then the husband cried to her, passionately,

“O, Winny, Winny, you are too hard with me! But—but,—Yes—yes, love, I will, if only you will show me how it is humanly possible. Revive, dearest! My wife! Winny! O God, she is gone, and thus! No, no—there! Yes, Winny, these are *my* kisses on your lips! It is *I* who ask you to forgive me! and to hear me say—‘Cousin, before God and man, I forgive your great crime! I will compromise no law, but I forgive you!’”

And then Winny revived a little, and kissed her husband gratefully, but looked so wearied the while! Then she tried to smile upon Jean, who had again crept in, and she said to her,

“Where is your husband? Let him come. Tell him beforehand, to comfort him, that the shadows that have weighed so long upon us all, are passing off now. He must not be afraid.” Jean ran out to conceal the blinding tears, and presently returned with Archy, who knelt before Winny, kissed the dear hand that was held out, and then withdrew with his wife a little behind the sofa.

Grace had slid off the chair and dragged herself to the sofa; and there she lay with her head against it, but moving no hand up to touch any other hand; saying no word to invite any kind of reply. Presently she heard that one voice which now alone she cared to hear, ask—

"Grace! Where is she? O, you are still here. I am glad. Reach me your hand." But there was no reply.

"Grace, dear, do you know that my husband—O, God will bless him for it, be you sure of that as I am—has so filled my life with happiness during these few months, that I have felt at times as though we had all made some great mistake in the reckoning. People will, you know, do so when they are very happy. Yes, I have thought that he and I must have lived together many, many years; I do not see else how so much of human bliss could have been pressed into so small a measure. I am content therefore to die: I do not say I would be if I did not know that death was inevitable. But, Grace, let me now tell you—and I can now tell you, dearest husband—why I seemed to have such morbid fancies about dying young. Both in my mother's family and in my father's, there have been deaths with the first child. And my own dear, dear mother——" There was a pause here, and a secret heart-cry of "O God, help her when she knows this!" Then she continued—"My mother nearly gave up her life when she gave birth to me; so you see I might have died soon in any case. But I have one trouble now—a great one on my soul. Ah! Grace, if you would but be your old strong self, with your new innocent soul, and take that trouble from me!"

"What—what—is—it?" at last murmured the muffled, hoarse voice from the floor, each word seeming more difficult than its predecessor.

"I will tell you, if you will first answer me honestly one question."

"Speak!"

"Do you think, in spite of all error and wrongdoings, that I may hope to go to Heaven!"

"Yes!"

"Then my trouble is, to know what I shall say when God asks me for my sister."

This was too much. There was an awful cry heard all through the house—a wild, frightful burst from that agonised, despairing wreck of a soul! Again and again it rose, though more faintly, for death never for an instant took his grasp from her heart—the half-stifled, struggling, frenzied heart, so full of life at last! As the cries subsided they began to change, now into half-stifled laughter, now into piteous but reluctant wailings.

"Grace, sister, you must go with me. I cannot leave you behind. Your hand,—thank God, I have you fast! Pray! Pray to Him! I am sure your soul has prayed again and again during these last few days, though you did not know that it was prayer, and I am sure that God has heard you! Husband! raise her! You have your will. Justice cannot be evaded,—she would not evade it. Comfort her, for my sake! Ay, there now, I can embrace you both with one grasp of my arms, and of my heart."

"Ah, no! I cannot, I cannot! My guilt is enough to drag you down too!" Grace was trying, in a half-helpless way to draw back, but Winny held her convulsively,—

"No—no, you are mine. Believe—pray—hope! Nearer, Grace!—or my voice won't reach you. A little nearer, dear! I feel—yes—the sands are going;

and—my—thoughts wander. What is it—I wanted to—to P—O, I know now. Grace, dear, I will say for you to God what you cannot say for yourself!” And Grace, no longer resisting, no longer apparently making effort of any kind, moved her lips, doubtless in prayer, and lay with her head against Mrs. Dell's body, and her eyes shut, but grasping the little hand, that was then all she possessed or needed any more.

And there was a long pause. Suddenly the Christmas-Eve bells broke out, and they seemed to awaken Mrs. Dell from a kind of slumber into which she had fallen. She opened her eyes and met *his* gazing upon hers, as he leant over her; and a smile, O, how ravishingly sweet it was to the poor husband amid all his agony!—illumined her face, — as she murmured still more faintly, “I thought I was in Heaven! But I see now God has sent you, in soul, to take me there! You will come altogether by-and-by. But bide your time, dearest. Do God's work and man's. And then when we meet—” Mr. Dell could hear no more, though the lips were still moving for a little while, after the eyes were closed.

Nearer and nearer he clasped her to him. Again the blue eyes opened, and he saw the smile of recognition, and he could see no more. It was too late, when he would again have looked.

As for Grace, no one spoke to her, nor touched her for some hours. They found her dead.

THE END.

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